イラスト 溝口ケージ
illustration Keji Mizoguchi

鴨志田一
Hajime Kamoshida

さくら荘のペットな彼女

5

電撃文庫

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さくら荘のペットな彼女5

それぞれの想いを胸にクリスマスを終えたさくら荘は、冬休みに突入する。そして俺は、ましろ、七海、美咲先輩を連れて、福岡の実家に帰省していた――って、なんだよこの状況！？　しかも妹の優子がましろに謎の対抗心を燃やし始めて、事態は混迷を極めていく。

そんな休み明けには、俺のゲーム企画のプレゼンに、仁さんの大学受験、七海の声優事務所所属オーディションがある。クリスマスからこじれたままの美咲先輩と仁さんの仲も気になるし、ましろはバレンタインを気にしている様子。俺の3学期は、やっぱり息つく暇もなさそうで！？　変態と天才と凡人が織りなす青春学園ラブコメ第5弾登場！

鴨志田（かもしだ）　一（はじめ）

1978年4月11日誕生。神奈川県出身の左利き。写真は焼き立てのパンです。昨年12月の忘年会でホームベーカリーが当たりました。その際にも、担当編集さんに失笑されたような……。気にせずに、頭部の焼き色のついた部分をもりもりと食べたいと思います。ちなみに四巻近影の答えは犬でした。

【電撃文庫作品】

神無き世界の英雄伝①～③
Kaguya1～5
さくら荘のペットな彼女
さくら荘のペットな彼女2
さくら荘のペットな彼女3
さくら荘のペットな彼女4
さくら荘のペットな彼女5

イラスト：溝口（みぞぐち）ケージ

部屋が暖かくなると空のペットボトルの中には音が鳴るものがあるのですが、その形状区別が付くようになりました。僕のこの少ないスキル欄が少し埋まった事を喜ぶべきなのか。

カバー／加藤製版印刷

さくら荘のペットな彼女

5

鴨志田一
Hajime Kamoshida
イラスト 溝口ケージ
illustration Keji Mizoguchi

かんだそらた
神田空太

水明芸術大学付属高校普通科二年生で、ましろ当番。ましろに触発され、ゲームクリエイターを目指している。101号室在住。

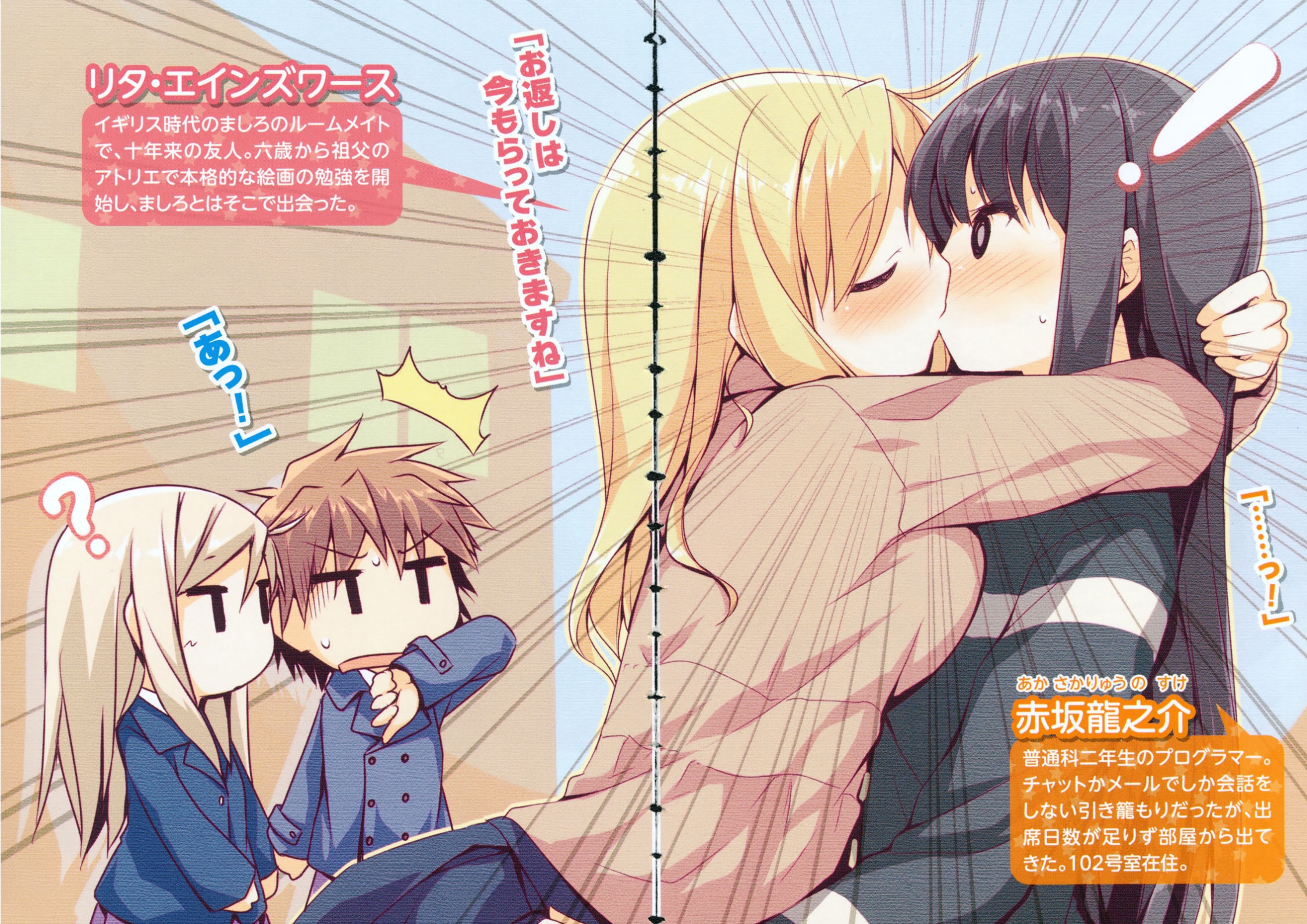
しいな
椎名ましろ

美術科の二年生で、漫画家としてデビューした。生活破綻っぷりと天然扇情発言で、空太を振り回す。202号室在住。

かんだゆうこ
神田優子

空太の妹で、ちょっとブラコン気味の中学三年生。空太と一緒に福岡にやってきたましろに、対抗心を燃やす。

「仁に渡せるといいな……」
かみいぐさみさき
上井草美咲
美術科の三年生。特待生としての実力を持ちながら、アニメばかりを作り権利を剥奪された変人。幼なじみの仁に想いを寄せる。201号室在住。
「き、義理ちゃうから」
普通科の二年生で、空太のクラスメイト。バイトで自活しながら、声優養成所に通う頑張り屋さん。203号室在住。
あおやまななみ
青山七海
「わたしはたけのこ派よ」


リタ・エインズワース
イギリス時代のましろのルームメイトで、十年来の友人。六歳から祖父のアトリエで本格的な絵画の勉強を開始し、ましろとはそこで出会った。
「お返しは今もらっておきますね」
「あっ！」
「……っ！」
あか さかりゅう の すけ
赤坂龍之介
普通科二年生のプログラマー。チャットかメールでしか会話をしない引き籠もりだったが、出席日数が足りず部屋から出てきた。102号室在住。

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デザイン●T

Prologue

Spring. The season of beginnings.

Back then, I had thought that a year was a very long time.

Winter. The season of endings.

Now, I feel that this one year was actually short.

The year dawned, and everything really just passed by in a flash.

The presentation, the audition, exams... and, the graduation of the seniors.

I have to leave this place because there's a place that I want to go onto.

Everyone is changing bit by bit in order to fulfil our dreams.

Could it be a sign of weakness if I think of it as lonesome?

No, I want to become strong enough to be able to deny it warmly.

Chapter 1

Sorata's Struggle-Fronts Have A Lot Of Abnormalities!

—We will be arriving at our last stop Hakata after our stop in Kokura.

While the announcement was playing, the bullet train passed through the Kanmon Tunnel and arrived in Kyuushuu. The time was slightly over half past six in the evening. They had left Sakurasou slightly after noon, and the view outside the window was dark.

Their final destination of the long journey was just a bit further. He was glad that their tiresome journey would end after the tunnel. No, he should have been happy, but Sorata Kanda's expression wasn't particularly bright.

—How shall I explain this to the family?

He stole a glance at the seat next to his. The source of his gloominess was this thing… no, this person.

"What is it?"

Noticing Sorata's glance, the girl next to him glanced at him. Her name was Mashiro Shiina. Her clear eyes and unreal dreamy atmosphere were impressive and had a mysterious appeal that made it difficult to ever forget her after seeing her once. But one shouldn't be fooled by her fragile appearance.

For Mashiro, who had lived a life with art as a priority ever since she was young, common sense did not exist and she had no life skills. If there weren't anyone to looked after her, or stay by her

side, she wouldn't able to do anything that a human should normally be able to do.

So Sorata, who was on <Mashiro Duty>, would have to do her laundry, pick out her panties, pack her lunch, force her to eat the food that she disliked, and clean her room daily. Nine months had already passed since he started those chores. But now, at the end of the year, Sorata had to face a new challenge.

Hakata was the last stop of the Nozomi bullet train. Inside Kyuushuu was the Fukuoka Prefecture, and Hakata was a city in that prefecture. And in Fukuoka lived Sorata's family.

—What am I supposed to do about a situation like this…

Mashiro, who wouldn't have the slightest clue as to how Sorata was feeling, was putting bamboo shoot shaped cookies into her mouth at a rhythmic pace.

—I can't think of a solution no matter how hard I thought about it.

He dropped his head weakly in despair and resignation.

Then Mashiro stretched out her white and pretty hand to his face.

"Have this."

There was a mushroom shaped biscuit in Mashiro's hand.

"I prefer the bamboo shoot ones though."

As soon as Sorata finished talking, Mashiro popped the last bamboo shoot shaped biscuit into her mouth. She nibbled it like a small animal and swallowed it.

"Mushrooms are good as well."

“If they’re good, then why didn't you just leave a shoot?!”

“Because Sorata won’t eat them.”

“Maybe it’s because you ate them in a shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, mushroom, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot order!”

“Sorata kept watching me.”

At her serene, certain-kill, counter-strike, Sorata choked up without realising it. He took a gulp of water and calmed himself.

“T-That’s because I don’t know what you might do while I’m not looking, Shiina!”

“I like the bamboo shoots.”

She didn’t care about Sorata’s excuse.

“I was going to explode if you had said you liked mushrooms!”

He wasn’t taken back by something of this scale. He was already used to it from the nine months of living together. And if he was to only talk about the current situation, Sorata felt somewhat nostalgic watching Mashiro’s senseless actions. It was because yesterday, on Christmas Eve, they finally reconciled after a month of stormy atmosphere which started when Mashiro hurt herself while cooking…

He was glad that he was able to talk to her normally like this, and he was truly grateful about it.

“No, maybe I’m in big trouble if I’m starting to think that this is normal…”

He looked outside the window with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Kanda, don’t talk to yourself on the bullet train. People are looking at you weirdly.”

The one who gave out the warning, like she was reasoning with a child, was Nanami Aoyama who was seated in front of him.

The one who was seated next to Nanami wasn’t present at the moment, so it was an empty seat.

“Aoyama.”

“What is it?”

“Please be frank whenever I’m doing something strange.”

“I’ll tell you frankly now that you’ve said it, and what you just said is already strange enough.”

“…Thanks for letting me know.”

He was already sensing it, but it seemed like this was proof. But it couldn’t be helped. The student dormitory Sakurasou that Sorata was living in… was a den of troubled students of their high school, so it was inevitable that something would go wrong with his head if he lived there for over a year and a half.

“I guess people are right when they say the environment affects the person.”

“You’re the one who told me to be frank. Here, I’ll give you the bamboo shoot I got, so cheer up.”

Nanami held out a plastic container that contained various biscuits. Amongst them were around five bamboo shoots sprouting up.

“The only person who is nice to me in this world is you, Aoyama.”

“D-Don’t say that.”

When he received the biscuit from Nanami, he suddenly thought of a minor question.

“Shiina-san? Why did you give some to Aoyama, yet not to me?”

“Because Nanami is my friend.”

Mashiro answered straight away.

“Then, what am I?”

“Sorata is…”

This time, she tilted her head and started to think. Had it been like before, she would’ve replied <Master> without thinking; so what was going on? He had to be on guard just in case she spouts out some greater nonsense.

“These days, Sorata is…”

“I am?”

“Not sure.”

Just when he was preparing himself, he lost his tension.

“Act proper.”

“So it’s my fault now?!”

“Act proper.”

“I’m acting a lot better than you, Shiina!”

“Kanda, stay quiet while you’re on a train.”

“My apologies.”

He lowered his voice after being warned by Nanami.

“See, act proper.”

At Mashiro’s somewhat triumphant tone, Sorata retorted <I don’t want to hear that from you!> in his head.

Let’s calm down and eat the bamboo shoot shaped biscuits first. As he told himself that, Misaki Kamiigusa, their senior who went to the toilet, came back. She gathered her legs, slumped down onto the seat next to Nanami’s, and rested her arm on the windowsill,

“Haa…”

and sighed in melancholy. The usual festive spirit that Misaki had was nowhere to be seen and Sorata could sense the desperation and sorrow on her face as she looked out at the scenery in a daze.

“Senpai, do you want a bamboo shoot?”

He offered a biscuit to the feeble Misaki. There wasn’t a quick reaction. After 5 seconds, Misaki looked at Sorata’s hand with her wavering pupils.

“…Yeah.”

Her voice was quiet. Misaki gently reached out, picked up a bamboo shoot and brought it to her slightly opened mouth.

Had it been the usual Misaki, she would’ve taken the whole thing and gobbled it all up, and after filling up her cheeks with the food like a squirrel, say:

“Bamboo shoots exist to be eaten by me!”,

while laughing happily. Sorata could picture the scene quite clearly, but the Misaki he was seeing right now appeared to be quite down and didn’t show any signs of getting better.

—The biggest problem could be Misaki-senpai.

There was a heap of troubles. For Sorata, he had personal things to do during this winter holidays. He received the letter yesterday from the <Let's Make a Game> competition that he passed the first round of judging. He had to prepare for the presentation taking place early next year.

He couldn't even see just how many troubles he had.

So why was Sorata away from Sakurasou and inside the bullet train with a throbbing headache? And with Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki, the three girls, at that… Of course, there was a reason as to why they were on that train. It was approximately ten hours ago… this morning was the root of this situation.

—

It was the 25th of December. Their Christmas morning started off with an unexplainable awkwardness.

When Sorata went to the kitchen after waking up, he saw Misaki sitting in her usual spot on the round table. She was dazed out while still wearing her pajamas. Her eyes were still puffy after all that crying from the night before and he could guess that she was still tired and sleep deprived.

—I wanted… Jin to hurt me today!

That's what Misaki said last night while slumped inside the dorm with only a bath towel wrapped around her. Those words wouldn't leave his head.

Because he couldn't even imagine how Misaki felt when she said that.

How could she want to be hurt by someone she liked?

Sorata wanted to treat a girl nicely and wanted the other person to do the same. That was completely different to hurting someone.

But he couldn't ask what Misaki meant now. Without being able to think of anything comforting to say, Sorata went to wake Mashiro up since he was unable to bear being together with Misaki alone. Then, they ate breakfast together with Nanami, who woke up fine by herself, while trying to maintain the usual mood.

Chihiro Sengoku, the supervising teacher of Sakurasou, popped her head in to where they were. Sorata didn't notice it, but she must've had come back sometime last night.

Sorata's next-room neighbour and the resident of Room 102, Ryuunosuke Akasaka, was not present. Sorata was told that he was going to spend the winter holidays staying over at a business hotel and concentrate on his programming activities.

The other resident of the dorm, Jin Mitaka of Room 103, hadn't come back since the night before.

The heavy atmosphere wasn't lifted even when they started to have their breakfast, and whenever they told a joke and laughed, it was in vain and their conversations didn't last very long.

It was because of Misaki. She mumbled "Hello…" in an inaudible voice and wordlessly nibbled on her shredded bread pieces. Usually, she would have swallowed the pieces whole.

"…"

The silence was heavy. He wanted to say something witty. But staying quiet must've been the correct thing to do here, because he

couldn't think of anything. Nanami must've been feeling the same. She kept her mouth shut with a bitter expression.

He didn't know what happened between Misaki and Jin last night… on Christmas Eve. But by looking at Misaki's situation, it was clear that something critical happened between Misaki and Jin while the two of them were left alone together in Sakurasou. It was because Misaki was this dejected even when she had never been this dejected no matter how many times she was rejected.

To escape from the suffocating silence, Sorata brought up the topic of the winter holidays which commenced today.

"By the way Shiina, what are you going to do during the holidays?"

"Draw manuscript."

Mashiro answered calmly.

"I'll ask just in case, but where?"

"Sakurasou."

"Really now…"

"Really."

"I've told you just now, right? Chihiro-sensei will be going to Australia for holidays, so we can't stay in Sakurasou."

The person in question was drinking coffee and sighing. She didn't try to cut into the conversation. Sorata wanted her to do something about Misaki.

"So you need to go back home."

"I heard."

An amazing reply came back to him.

“Then you should pack to return to England!”

“That’s what Sorata should be doing.”

“Could you please not say such dangerous things with a straight face?!”

Chihiro yawned and butted in.

“Kanda, you’re sleep talking; are you still half asleep?”

“How is that sleep talking?”

“You should know that Mashiro can’t book tickets in the first place.”

“That’s right.”

Mashiro agreed curtly.

“Don’t pull a serious face on me!”

He retorted with all his strength, but it was meaningless. He already knew that. It was just as Chihiro said. There was no way Mashiro would be able to do that.

But he wasn’t able to talk about the winter holiday plans with Mashiro prior to Christmas because of the awkwardness.

“It’s impossible to send her off to England now, so you take responsibility and take Mashiro home.”

“Really?”

“What a great idea.”

“You really need to learn how to refuse people! And don’t tell me you actually think it’s a good idea?!”

As they were talking like that, Nanami who was seated next to Mashiro, was making a stiff expression.

“Aoyama, you don’t look so well.”

“N-No, not at all.”

But she really didn’t look well.

“You’re making a really troubled expression… no, don’t tell me, you as well…?”

“I-It’s fine! I was just distracted and forgot about it because of the Christmas Eve event…”

“Then isn’t it a big problem if you forgot?!”

“D-Don’t worry. I can ask Mayu or Yayoi for help.”

The mentioned Mayu Takasaki and Yayoi Honjou were Nanami’s best friends in class.

Biting on a toast in her mouth, Nanami typed out a message on her phone straight away.

“Aoyama, can’t you just go back home? Assuming you borrow some train fare to Osaka from the teacher in the worst scenario.”

“I won’t go back… didn’t I say that I can’t go back before?”

“Ah…”

That’s right. Nanami came all the way here, even against her father’s wishes, because she wanted to become a voice actress. So

she did mention that she won't be returning home until she reaches her goal.

Then that meant that she had to rely on her friends.

The more important matter at hand was Mashiro.

"Oh, that's right. What about the make-up exams? Shiina scored a straight zero for all of her 9 final exams just like semester 1, right? She won't be able to enjoy her winter holidays without passing them all, right? Ahhh, what a pity. I guess winter holidays just went up in smoke."

"What nonsense are you spouting off? I already made her redo the exams when I was handing them out and took care of it already."

"You sure have a finger in every pie, don't you?!"

"I won't forgive you if you get in the way of my holidays."

"I see that your brain only works fast when you sense that you're at risk!"

The hope of Chihiro remaining back in Sakurasou because of make-up exams had been shattered. He was at a loss what to do next since things had come to this stage.

"Hey, Shiina."

"What is it?"

"Are you really going to come to my house?"

Was it even OK for a high school girl to stay at another high school boy's household? Sorata's family might accept it if he explained the situation to them, but aren't there a lot of problems before that…?

“I think it’s time to greet your parents.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“Because I’m always relying on you.”

“Well, it’s true that you’re incredibly reliant on me!”

“So Sorata has accepted it as well?”

“Isn’t that beside the point?!”

Even when Sorata urged her to continue, Mashiro drank some hot chocolate from her cat printed mug and assumed the talk to be over.

“That aside, don’t you think you should give us some advice?!”

“Make sure you use birth control.”

“How did it get to that?!”

Chihiro ignored Sorata’s desperate cries and yawned in annoyance.

Meanwhile, Nanami must’ve got a message from her friends. She looked at her phone display with a mysterious expression.

“Aoyama?”

When he called out her name, she looked up dazed.

“Uh…”

“There’s nothing wrong, right?”

“I don’t think so…”

“How do you mean?”

“Mayu went on a family trip and Yayoi will be on a training camp with the softball club, so none of them are here…”

“Then what will you do?!”

“Then Aoyama can stay over at Kanda’s as well.”

Chihiro dropped bomb-like advice indifferently.

“What on earth are you saying?! Is your head alright?! That’s impossible!”

“An extra person shouldn't make too much of a difference.”

“While that might be true, the issue is someone coming with me in the first place!”

When his and Nanami’s eyes met, she was looking at him with a slightly expecting gleam in her eyes. But she must’ve corrected her thoughts, because she shook her head sideways.

“I can’t go to a guy’s house!”

She complained strongly to Chihiro.

“Then what will you do? Do you have another plan?”

“W-Well…”

Nanami couldn’t say anything in reply.

“And Kanda, you’re such a cruel man to abandon a girl in this cold weather.”

“Hey, don’t you think you’re being too mean now?! I don’t even know where to start pointing out your mistakes!”

He didn’t have the patience to speak politely to Chihiro.

Chihiro delivered the final blow by saying,

“I’ll be leaving in the afternoon today, so please leave before noon.”

And declared the short time limit. It was already past 9 o'clock. There wasn't enough time to find a friend to help them out. Lost for words, Nanami looked at Misaki.

"W-What will you do, Kamiigusa-senpai?"

Misaki, crouching on her seat, was their last hope.

"You'll be going back home, right, Kamiigusa?"

"…Don't want to."

"Senpai?"

"If I go, I'll be reminded of Jin."

Misaki and Jin were childhood friends who grew up in the same town. If she were to go back to her hometown, she would be reminded of Jin and be in pain.

Jin would stay over at his six different girlfriends' houses in turn over the winter holidays, but if he bumped into Misaki accidentally back in their hometown, then a tragedy would unfold.

Misaki buried her face into her knees and mumbled <I don't want to go> once more. She looked like an abandoned kitty. Sorata's compassionate thoughts bubbled up and then

"Then do you want to come to my house as well, senpai?"

He said those words.

After that, it was a sure shot

—

"Komachi, this is the bullet train. Isn't it fast~?"

He lifted the cat cage up high to the window and let the brown tabby cat Komachi see the view outside. He only brought one cat with him. Going back home with all seven cats was a stretch, so Sorata decided to ask the people that he knew from the shopping district to look after each cat during the winter holidays.

But due to the lack of time, he wasn't able to find a home for all 7 cats; so Sorata decided to bring Komachi back home, as he was extremely shy of strangers.

"This is Nozomi. Nozomi, just like the black cat Nozomi."

"Kanda, the situation won't change just because you try to avoid the reality by talking to a cat."

"No, please think about it critically. I got used to these things from the various situations in the past and I do think that this can't be helped, but don't you think there's something wrong here?"

"Sorata, can't you give up?"

"I don't have to! I wouldn't be a human if I were to be indifferent in a situation like this!"

While they were conversing like that, the bullet train arrived at Kokura Station and started to move again according to the schedule. How should he explain this situation to his family and how should he introduce these three to them? He didn't have any ideas on how he could explain this, and there were only 15 minutes left until they'd reach the final station Hakata...

"So you really do regret it?"

Nanami asked with a troubled expression.

"…There's no use crying over spilled milk, so I want to think about the future."

Sorata's mouth twisted in unpleasantness.

"That's quite a depressed attitude for a positive person."

"When you say I have a depressed attitude for a positive person, doesn't that still mean that I'm being depressed?"

"Don't pick at what I say. I'll cooperate."

Given that Nanami was looking at Mashiro's direction, it was needless of Sorata to ask what she meant.

"I'll look after Mashiro when we go to your house, so don't worry."

"…Aoyama."

"Unless you don't want me to do anything."

"N-No way! Please, I beg you!"

He quickly warned Mashiro who was seated next to him.

"So that's how it is. Got it, Shiina?"

"There are no more bamboo shoots left."

"Don't go back to that talk!"

"There are only mushrooms left."

"I feel sorry for you, so just have them as well!"

Mashiro picked up a mushroom and brought it towards Sorata's mouth.

What's even more, was that she spoke this with a cute expression:

"Ahh~nn."

“D-Don’t you ever do that in my house.”

“Hm~mm, so it’s OK now?”

Nanami spoke in a ticked off voice and glared at Sorata.

“Maybe I shouldn’t cooperate.”

She was saying some terrifying stuff.

“This is forbidden in the past, present and the future!”

“Uuu.”

Mashiro made a disappointed expression and fed the mushroom shaped biscuit to Misaki.

Was she even listening at all?

—We will be arriving at our last stop: Hakata. Thank you for riding the bullet train. We hope to see you again.

Sorata sighed again as the businesslike announcement echoed from the speakers. There were still issues. But he was somewhat relieved that Mashiro would now be under control; which was the biggest concern Sorata had.

“I’m just hoping that everything else works out by itself.”

“So you’re going to accept the harsh situation even as you grumble, Kanda?”

At Nanami’s innocent words, Sorata’s expression froze. He really started to worry if he was going to be able to survive this.

The group arrived in Hakata, rode the subways and the local trains for approximately 20 minutes each and finally arrived at the station closest to Sorata's house.

The four of them stood at the station.

"Is it far from here?"

"It's not even five minutes away, but maybe more like a ten-minutes walk."

Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami walked in a row and Misaki quietly followed behind them. She seemed to be out of heart and apathetic. It looked like she was going to disappear to somewhere.

"Sorata."

"Hmm? What is it, Shiina?"

Sorata answered without much thought since all that was on his mind was Misaki. But Sorata's thoughts now had to be fully occupied with thoughts of Mashiro because of what she was about to say next.

"Give me a piggyback ride."

He thought he was dreaming for a moment. That he was still back inside the bullet train and asleep. But even when he was surprised enough to have a heart attack, he wouldn't wake up from this dream. That was a given, because this was the reality.

"Okay, then why don't I hear the reason first?"

He tensed up for what Mashiro was about to say next. If he wasn't focused, he would end up giving a piggyback ride to Mashiro.

"I'm sick of it."

“Sick of moving?! Can’t you at least say that your legs are sore or something?!”

“I’m tired, so give me a piggyback ride.”

“I won’t do it anyway!”

He still couldn’t estimate what she was going to say.

“Right. Then hugging me is fine.”

“Don’t you start blackmailing me and raise the difficulty!”

“Eventhough you wanted to give me a piggyback ride yesterday.”

Mashiro pouted her lips.

“T-That’s because you lost your shoe somewhere and you were walking around barefoot in December! I’m not cold hearted enough to leave you like that!”

“So you’re being shy.”

“To be precise, I’m being angry!”

“…”

“W-What.”

“Consider it discharged.”

“I already considered it discharged, and I firmly refuse!”

“…”

All he did was to state the obvious, but Mashiro’s expression said that she couldn’t accept it. But for now, it seemed like Sorata’s intent of not wanting to give her a piggyback ride got across to her. She let out a <boo> sound unhappily. Sorata really wished that

Mashiro wouldn't look at him with that expression of hers that churns every man's heart. He wanted to let her hop on his back without him really understanding why, and the feelings that he bottled up yesterday were about to burst out.

Sorata shook his head and quickly bottled up his thoughts again.

"L-Let's hurry."

Was it really going to be OK… to go back home and introduce them to his parents? Nanami did agree to help, but it's impossible to predict what Mashiro would do, so there wasn't a way to solve that issue. The answer was quite clear. And at this rate, he didn't know when he was going to burst. It was only yesterday when he made up his mind to focus on his actions only.

"The words gloomy mood perfectly describe how I feel…"

Sorata dragged his heavy bag around and walked towards the ticket gates. But as soon as he took the first step, someone strongly pulled at his coat's hood.

"Gurhhh!"

A strangled sound escaped his lips.

"I told you that I won't be giving you a piggyback ride, Shiina!"

He raged and looked back with a frightening expression.

"It wasn't me."

Mashiro's voice came from beside him.

The one who was holding the hood was Nanami and she looked down in a dejected matter.

“Aoyama, care to explain what you’re doing? Do you have something against me? If you do, then just say it!”

“N-Never mind!”

“About what?”

“I think I’ll go back!”

Nanami suddenly turned left and walked back to the station.

“If you want to go back home, then it’s on the other side.”

“B-But sleeping over at a boys’ house, won’t your family look at me strangely?”

“You can’t say that now that we are here…”

“T-That’s… I was OK with it when we left Sakurasou, but, ya know what I mean.”

She must’ve wanted to say that her heart was beating quite fast, because she placed her hand on top of her chest.

“S-So, u-um uhh, how should I introduce myself to Kanda’s parents?”

So what she was saying was that she was worried now that she was near at Sorata’s house and grabbed Sorata’s hood… probably. Well, it wasn’t like Sorata didn’t understand how she felt. If Sorata and Nanami’s positions were reversed and Sorata had to go to her house, he would’ve fled with all his might.

“Just don’t say anything like <I may be very lacking, but…>[1] or anything along those lines.”

“W-What are you saying! I won’t say that even as a joke…”

“I was mainly speaking that to you though, Shiina. Got it?”

“Trust me.”

“I wonder why I’m so worried about that reply of yours!”

He turned around to face Misaki and confirmed something just in case. She did seem to be listening to the conversation, but she didn’t take part at all.

“Senpai, umm, I hope you also understand.”

“…Yeah.”

Misaki shouldn’t cause any trouble this time around. But it would’ve been much better for her to be energetic and hyper rather than all gloomy like this. He really hoped that she would return back to her usual self.

Leading the way, the group exited the ticket gates after him and left the station.

There was only one bus terminal in that non-stop express station, so the atmosphere felt like time had slowed down. Maybe it was the lack of tall buildings that provided this atmosphere. There were a handful of small shops in the surroundings and the roof of a residential house could be spotted slightly far away.

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[1] Japanese phrase for introducing oneself as fiancé or some similar strong relationship intention.

Sorata let the brown tabby cat Komachi out of his cage and as soon as he did, he purred against Sorata's leg. The cat must've been stressed from the long trip, so Sorata was really grateful that he didn't make a fuss.

Komachi ran towards Misaki, who was the last one to pass through the ticket gates, and jumped into her arms. The only person who Komachi liked, apart from Sorata, was Misaki.

Although slightly bitter, Misaki wore a small smile. That cat was truly great.

Leaving Misaki to Komachi, Sorata scanned the surroundings in front of the station. Since he didn't return in spring or summer, it had already been a year since he came back.

He thought the shops changed slightly, but it wasn't like he could remember how they had looked before either. The Kanda household originally lived in the proximity of the station near Suimei High, but moved to Fukuoka due to his father's job. Sorata was accepted into Suimei High at the time when they were moving, so he never actually lived in this town. Even if his family lived here, it didn't feel like his hometown at all.

"Now then, shall we get moving?"

As he declared in determination or in defeat,

"Onii-chan~!"

A familiar voice could be heard.

A girl of primary school student's appearance was running towards them down the straight path leading to the station. She was smiling

brightly and was flapping her arms as if she was trying to fly. A large backpack on her back bobbed up and down as she ran.

As Sorata stood still and watched her run, the girl tripped over her feet approximately 3 meters away from him.

"Ah!"

After giving a short yelp, the girl planted herself into the ground at the speed she was running at.

"Ouch!"

Her face slammed into the concrete. Watching it was painful enough. And when she fell, the contents inside the backpack spilled out; such as candies, Oishiibo[2], chocolate and various other snacks.

The other people at the station looked at the girl in surprise. They were all thinking the same thing. What a pitiable kid…

Not wanting to be associated with the girl, Sorata said,

"Ah, my house is this way."

And started to lead Mashiro and Nanami.

The girl didn't move from the ground. As he walked past her, he suddenly heard the girl jumping onto her feet behind him.

"O-Onii-chan?! Did you forget about me?"

Being left without a choice, he stopped on his feet. But he didn't look back just yet.

"That girl is staring at Kanda…"

Nanami looked back and forth between Sorata and the girl.

---

[2] **Oishiibo**: Lit. "Delicious Stick". Some sort of snack.

“It’s not like I know her.”

No, but he actually did. He really did.

The girl delivered the final blow to Sorata.

“Ah, or maybe you can’t recognise me because of how mature I grew? Oh geez, you're helpless, Onii-chan! But don’t worry. No matter how mature I become, you’re the only one for me.”

Sorata reached his limits after listening to that. There were too many points that he could pick out.

“You haven’t changed one bit since last year!”

He pointed that out as soon as he turned around. The girl was actually in her third grade of middle school, but she was no different from the mother and primary-school-aged daughter pair which walked by moments ago.

“No, maybe you shrank instead?”

“I-I didn’t shrink! I grew up! Onii-chan, if you remember me, then don’t ignore me! I scraped my knees!”

“That’s because you fell down on your own accord…”

The girl extended both of her hands towards him as if to say <help me up>. Sorata didn’t want to attract any more attention, so he gave the girl a hand after collecting the scattered snacks.

The girl buried her face into Sorata’s chest after wrapping both of her arms around him tightly.

“Smells like Onii-chan.”

“Don’t say such creepy stuff. Get away from me.”

He tried to shake her off, but she held on and wouldn’t let go.

“Sorata, what’s that?”

Mashiro asked behind him.

“Y-You’re calling each other on a first name basis?”

He ignored Yuuko’s surprise for now and explained to them.

“Ah, that here is my sister Yuuko.”

Being referred to as <that>, Yuuko grumbled and peeped at the three girls behind Sorata's arms.

"I told you numerous times before, right? That I had a little sister."

"…"

With a straight poker face that was impossible to read, Mashiro looked at Yuuko. Yuuko didn't avoid Mashiro's gaze either. Was it only Sorata who could feel the sparks flying between them?

"O-Onii-chan, who is this really pretty person?"

Yuuko's voice was rough.

"C-Could she be a fairy? And only Yuuko can see her?"

"I can't rule that possibility out, but she's probably a human."

"R-Really? I feel like she's of a different species to me."

"Then maybe you're not a human?"

"What?! Is that how it is?"

"No, don't actually get surprised. I'm only kidding. She's umm, a friend… at school, Mashiro Shiina."

He was finally able to introduce Mashiro after the conversation took a wrong turn. When Sorata finally thought they were back on track, Mashiro opened her mouth.

"Not friends."

"T-Then you two are beyond friends?!"

Yuuko was surprised.

"Our relationship is above master and servant."

“What?!”

Yuuko’s nostrils were flapping as she reeled back in surprise.

“Sorry, what does that mean?”

“…”

“…”

Yuuko and Mashiro, who stopped talking when they shouldn’t have, confronted each other wordlessly again. Although, Yuuko wasn’t really confronting Mashiro because she was still hiding in Sorata’s shadow…

Yuuko was looking at the expressionless Mashiro with a sense of rivalry. But the one who talked first was Mashiro.

“You’re that girl from the phone call.”

“What’s with that reaction like you’re meeting your husband’s illicit partner!”

Now that Sorata thought about it, there was a time when Mashiro answered a phone call from Yuuko before… They only exchanged a few words with each other, but to think that she still remembered it... Now it really looked like Sorata was caught for adultery.

“Y-You’re that phone woman!”

“Huh? You’re going to go in that direction as well, Yuuko?”

“Get away from Sorata.”

“I firmly refuse! O-Onii-chan is Yuuko’s brother!”

Yuuko fought desperately back even though she moved slightly away from his body.

But that resistance didn't last very long.

"I am Sorata's."

Yuuko froze on the spot with her mouth hanging open at Mashiro's shocking words. She looked as if her soul had escaped. But this was a good chance. Sorata had to take control of the situation before Yuuko revived.

"Alright, time, time! We're going to rethink of a plan! Now, gather around!"

He signaled to Mashiro to come closer. Mashiro approached him wordlessly. Misaki, still holding the cat, and Nanami who was watching the commotion came closer as well.

"But I haven't said anything yet."

"Neither have I…"

"Yes, that's right. And this is all Shiina's fault! I told you before, right? I told you not to say anything stupid."

"Then Sorata is mine?"

"Now you're talking like a gangster representing Japan!"

"I can't do it."

"Do what?! Is there a reason as to why you can't play along in a situation like this?!"

"The stake that sticks up gets hammered down."

"Maybe you were trying to hammer down Yuuko, but the one who was greatly affected was me! And I didn't even stick up! I got

hammered to the ground! I'm not even visible! Can't you attack in a more sensible way?!"

"But that girl, she looks really close to Sorata."

"Because she's my sister!"

"…"

Mashiro suddenly closed her mouth. She eyed Sorata wordlessly and looked straight at his eyes.

"W-What?"

"Who will it be between me and her?"

"Don't force me to choose one without going through the mid-process!"

"Woaaaaa~aaaa, Onii-chan, let Yuuko join in~."

Yuuko revived earlier than expected and tugged at Sorata's arm. As a result, Sorata was now sandwiched between Mashiro and Yuuko. Mashiro's unpleasant glare was particularly prickly.

"S-So, y-you are?"

Still half-hidden behind Sorata, Yuuko asked Nanami. She changed her target so that she wouldn't have to focus on Mashiro. Was she planning on going on the offensive? Her tightly pursed lips gave off the feeling that she was trying to fight back her tears.

"Ah, I'm…"

Nanami was stumped at what to say and eyed Sorata. She was asking <What should I say?> with her eyes. As expected of Nanami. She understood the situation well. When Sorata eyed Nanami with

the message of <Just say that we're classmates>, she nodded in confirmation.

Their eye-signalling was a great success.

"I'm Nanami Aoyama. I'm in the same class as Kanda…"

"A-And?"

"And I live in the same dorm as him."

"There wasn't a point to eye-signalling then!"

"Woaa~aaa! Onii-chan's being played out by lots of bad city women~!"

"Don't say something that'll create misunderstanding! And that aside, get off me already."

Mashiro hadn't taken her eyes off Sorata since a while ago. She was eyeing Yuuko to get off him. At this rate Mashiro was going to curse someone.

"I can't get up properly because my knees hurt from that fall before. I can't walk! So, Onii-chan, give me a piggyback ride!"

With a <hey> cheer, Yuuko jumped on his back.

"…She stole my piggyback ride."

Mashiro was getting even more upset. Sorata didn't think it was only his misunderstanding that Mashiro was staring at a certain place.

"Yuuko, walk with your own feet!"

"It hurts, so I can't walk, I can't even do a moonsault."

“You’re not able to do the last even if you were as healthy as a horse!”

“Oh, there’s no need to overestimate me.”

“…I guess it would be overrated if I say that.”

Nanami corrected herself in apology.

“Sorry, Aoyama. I think you’ve noticed by now, but my sister is an idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot!”

“Sorry, the lord is angry. The lord of all idiots.”

“You’re so mean! My neighbours always compliment me on how energetic I am!”

“Oh, you didn’t know? <Energetic> is a nicer way of saying <idiotic>.”

“Huh? Then being really energetic is equal to being really stupid?! I didn’t learn any of that in middle school!”

Nanami pulled a complicated expression. She was probably thinking that it wasn’t taught in high school either.

“I feel like we’re being watched like we’re a bunch of monkeys in a zoo, and I’m starting to feel like charging them for it, so let’s get going…”

When he looked around at the spectators and made eye contact with them, those people started to move again as if they were reminded of things they had to do. Before all of them left, Sorata started to walk towards the house with Yuuko on his back.

On their way, Sorata introduced Nanami, Misaki and the brown striped cat Komachi to Yuuko. And he was sure that he wasn't the only one hearing Mashiro's unhappy whines behind them.

Sorata's house was in a quiet corner of the residential area. The appearance of the house was an ordinary two-storey house that settled in harmoniously with its surroundings; if there was a charm point to the house, then all that could be said was that the roof was pointy.

As soon as they walked through the main gate, Yuuko jumped off Sorata's back and ran in the house flinging her shoes off in the process.

"Mum~! There's a big problem, a big problem! Onii-chan came back as a dirty adult!"

"Who are you calling dirty?!"

Sorata complained as he took his shoes off, but there wasn't a reply.

After a short while,

"Geez, what's all the commotion about?"

His mother came out wearing an apron. Yuuko followed behind her and then:

"Look! There are three girls!"

Pointed at Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki in that order.

"And their faces are on a different level."

"Oh my, so these are the friends you mentioned on the phone earlier? Aren't they pretty ladies?"

“Mum, why are you complimenting the enemy?”

Who was it that complimented the girls’ faces first, I wonder.

“Yes, yes. Be quiet now, Yuuko.”

“Why?!”

“Because you’re noisy.”

It was a fair point.

“You’re so mean~!”

“And we can’t talk while you’re talking, Yuuko.”

“Woaaaa~aaa, daddy~! Now even mum is being mean to me!”

This time, she ran deeper into the house to request help from father.

Who was it that complained about not being able to stand up, walk and do a moonsault? Well, I already knew she was faking it...

The mother didn’t seem to pay too much attention to Yuuko and smiled apologetically to Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki.

“Now then, everyone. You all must be tired from your long trip. Are you hungry?”

The sun had completely set, and it was already 8 o’clock at night.

“I’ll prepare some dinner, so come on in.”

“Thank you. Then please excuse us.”

Nanami thanked her first and Misaki politely answered after her.

“Please take care of us for a few days.”

And finally, Mashiro tried to say

“I may be very lacking, but…”

So:

“Didn’t I tell you not to say something like that?!”

Sorata quickly stopped her.

“I thought you were hoping that I would say it.”

“Could you please not think of my desperate pleas as an attempt to crack a joke?!”

“It seems like we’ll have a very fun holiday season.”

After hearing everyone’s introduction, Sorata’s mother didn’t appear to be bothered but rather happy, as she said that. When he thought about it, she had always been that way…

Then, Yuuko came back with Sorata’s father.

“You’ve arrived, Sorata.”

He must’ve worked eventhough today was a holiday, because his father was wearing a shirt and a tie.

“Ah, yes. I’m back.”

“Mhmm.”

With his arms crossed, Sorata’s father scanned over Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki in that order.

He nodded his head deeply and in a stern voice, he called Sorata’s name.

“Sorata.”

“W-What is it?”

Was he going to say that it was unreasonable of him to bring three girls back home? If so, then things were going to get sour. His father was quite a conservative man.

Sorata tensed up on guard. His father spoke to him with a very serious expression.

“I don’t remember allowing polygamy.”

“Even if you do accept it, the country won’t!”

He was the fool for expecting a proper reaction from his father. After all, his father was the one who said that he would be fine without Sorata as long as Yuuko came with him when he had to relocate to Fukuoka. He told Sorata to do whatever he wanted to.

“Thanks for coming all this way. Do enjoy your stay here.”

Ignoring Sorata, his father welcomed Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki.

“We haven’t finished our talk yet, have we?!”

“Don’t even think about fooling around now that you’re home. I have nothing to say to you!”

“But I do!”

“It doesn’t feel good having a son who is unable to resist loving his father so much, Sorata.”

“No one said anything like that! What I’m trying to say is… ahh~, never mind. Let’s end our talk here.”

Sorata would only wear himself out talking like this. Also, his father already disappeared into the living room with Yuuko without bothering to listen to him. They weren’t going to be able to converse

like that and Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki were watching. He didn't want to show his quirky family traits to them.

No, it was too late for that. The only one who seemed normal was his mother… when Yuuko and his father were like that.

Sighing inside his heart, Sorata slouched his shoulders.

"How should I say this, Kanda's family is quite lively."

"Aoyama, you don't need to hold back. Just call them strange."

"I-I didn't think that, but…"

"But?"

"I think I understand how you were able to adapt to Sakurasou."

"Yeah, I feel the same way."

Thinking about how he should introduce Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki, he overlooked his family. But in the end, the result wasn't bad. A minus and a minus balanced each other out, but the process of how it happened didn't matter. In the end, he was able to introduce three girls to his family during the holiday season by inviting them all home.

"This must be how people grow stronger."

The only problem left was Misaki's situation.

As they were taking off their shoes, Misaki quietly whispered to Komachi in her arms...

—I wonder if Jin is eating well.

Finding some time before dinner, Sorata moved his baggage into his room on the second floor. However, it couldn't even be considered to be baggage, as all there was inside were some old spare clothes to change into. 90% of the baggage that Sorata brought back from Sakurasou were Mashiro's everyday supplies.

The three girls, including Mashiro, were organising their baggage in the guestroom next to his room. There were three rooms on the second floor, and one of them belonged to Yuuko. The parents' room was on the first floor as a 4LDK-format[3]. With only Yuuko and his parents living in the house most of the time, there was a spare room.

Sorata laid on his bed for the first time in a while. The bed didn't feel reminiscent at all. He was used to living in Room 101 in Sakurasou. The scent of the room itself smelt different.

Holding his phone, he looked up Jin's number on his contacts.

He could hear the dial tone in his ears. He could only pray that Jin would answer the phone.

After hearing the tone once and then twice, Jin didn't pick up the phone. Third dial tone failed as well. On the fourth dial tone, someone finally answered.

<Did you want to hear my voice all of a sudden?>

It was undoubtedly Jin's voice.

"Yes."

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[3] **4LDK**: Japanese house/apartment consisting of 4 rooms, living-, dining room and kitchen.

<You're sure making me happy.>

For some reason, he missed hearing the usual joke that he heard yesterday. That relieved him at least.

"Senpai, where are you right now?"

<Hmm? I'm leeching on the school council president's room.>

"What?"

He heard something completely unexpected. What did Jin mean by the school council president?

<Ah, maybe I should say former school council president.>

Either way, it was the same person that Sorata thought of.

"When you say the school council president... or rather, former school council president… you mean the one wearing black rimmed glasses who I shouted at when we were asking for the culture festival permission?"

<I am, why?>

Wasn't Jin on bad terms with that person…?

"…Senpai, I thought you were targeted by that person?"

<He's the type to subconsciously act cold and push away people he likes.>

"What kind of a relationship do you guys share…"

<A relationship that can't be revealed to others, I suppose.>

"I'm asking seriously here."

<Geez, you're such a bore.>

"So, what kind of a relationship do you have with him?"

<Don't work yourself up now. I've been in the same class as him for all three years. You could say that it was fate that brought us together.>

Sorata couldn't tell how serious Jin was. Even if being in the same class for three years was true, he didn't think that they would be friends. However, if Jin really was staying over at his house, then it might be true.

As he was thinking these thoughts,

<Who are you calling friends! You're creeping me out!>

A slightly hysteric voice could be heard over the phone. It was undoubtedly the former school council president's voice. Sorata remembered the voice because he was told off by him quite a few times.

It seemed like Jin wasn't lying when he said that he was staying over at the former school council president's house. The relationship between the two became even more obscure.

Jin should be able to go to a lot of different places even if he didn't ask the former school council president in the first place.

"Why are you at the former school council president's house when you have a lot of girlfriends who would let you sleep over?"

<Girlfriends? Who?>

"Asami, the 4th year in acting school."

<She punched me in the face and left me when I said that I'll be taking an exam to get into a university in Osaka.>

“Huh? Then what about nurse Noriko?”

<When I said that I’ll be taking an exam for a university in Osaka, she said 'We had some fun over the year'.>

“Then what about Kana who runs the flower shop?”

<When I told her that I’ll be taking an exam for a university in Osaka, she smiled and said 'I’m getting married as well'.>

“T-Then what about the young housewife Meiko?”

<When I said… ah, enough of that now. She said: 'Yeah, I think we should wrap things up. I think my husband noticed anyway.'>

“And race queen Suzune?”

<She curtly said 'I’m not the type to do a long distance relationship'.>

“And Rumi the office lady…”

<…She told me to do my best with my exam preparations.>

“That means.”

<It means I’ve been dumped and separated.>

“…I-I see.”

Six people in a row… only Jin would be able to pull that kind of brave act off.

<So, what did you want?>

“I think you would know even if I don’t tell you. I’m with my family in Fukuoka and…”

<I know. I heard from Chihiro-sensei. You're with Mashiro, Aoyama… and Misaki as well, right? I really respect you.>

"It only sounds like you're making fun of me!"

<Not too far from it, I suppose.>

Jin giggled.

"That aside, you know what state Misaki-senpai is in, right?"

It was Jin who stole Misaki's cheerfulness from Misaki. Although Sorata didn't know what took place on that Christmas Eve night, whatever Jin had said changed Misaki into a soulless person.

"Just do something."

<I did and things ended up like this.>

"…"

<So there's nothing else I can do.>

"…What happened?"

After wondering whether he should ask or not, Sorata bravely asked the question that he wasn't able to ask to Misaki. He didn't think things would move forward if he didn't ask. Sorata believed that only Jin could make Misaki happy.

"What happened in the night of Christmas Eve?"

<…>

All that could be heard over the phone was Jin's breaths.

"What did you say to Misaki-senpai? What did you do to her?"

<I didn't really say nor do anything.>

“Senpai.”

Sorata’s irritation was reflected on his voice. He couldn’t keep his emotions in check. Jin didn’t seem to mind it; he even laughed warmly at it.

A short silence fell between them.

As Sorata waited, Jin talked first.

<I told Misaki that I like her.>

He sounded as casual as a morning greeting. So Sorata’s mind wasn’t able to comprehend what Jin said straight away. Because that was something Jin said he would never do and it didn’t match up with the appearance of depressed Misaki.

“What?”

Sorata responded with a stunned voice half a beat late.

<What, didn’t you hear me? I confessed to Misaki.>

“…”

He wasn’t hearing things. It seemed like Jin really did confess to her.

<Hello~? Maybe the signal is wonky?>

“No, the signal’s fine. I can hear you clearly.”

<Then I won’t say it thrice.>

“No, but the thing is… huh?! What’s that supposed to mean?”

If Jin did confess to Misaki, things should’ve finished with a happy ending.

“I’m sorry. I can’t understand it with my brain…”

That night… on Christmas Eve, what Sorata saw was a crying Misaki. She was so worn out that she hugged him.

<I told her to give me some time because I like her.>

“Time?”

<I’m going to Osaka University to fulfill my dreams. So I want to suppress my feelings for Misaki and only look at my goal. If I can’t do that, then I can’t become the person I want to be.>

“…”

<But Misaki won’t listen to me and says that she likes it the way things are right now. That she wants to go out with me right now. That she wants me to embrace her right now. That she wants to become one with me right now…>

“…”

<She even said that she’ll go to Osaka University with me. But I can’t allow that. She doesn’t understand why I’m going to Osaka University. It’s really like Misaki.>

“…Yeah, that’s right.”

<Also… She has to go to Suimei Arts University. Suimei has a strong film related undergraduate studies. They have a theatre room, motion shooting studio, audio studio as well as a server dedicated to rendering. The only place that has these facilities is Suimei Arts University.>

“That might be true... but isn’t that obvious since Misaki-senpai has been waiting for you to look at her?”

<But I can't become an ordinary man and abandon my goals just for that.>

"That's…"

<I also have a goal.>

"…"

<I want to be able to create the best work with Misaki. I want to be able to make something that only Misaki and I can create. And to do so, I have things to study.>

"Can't you do that while you're dating Misaki-senpai?"

<Don't you think I'd already be doing that if that was possible?>

For Misaki Sorata did want to get a firm grip on Jin for just a bit longer. But the words got stuck in his throat and he wasn't able to say anything further. He understood how Jin was feeling. There was a difference in the degrees, but Sorata also had a similar feeling about Mashiro. He could feel it.

Now wasn't the time. The time would come when he made further progress. He wanted to stand by her side and not trailing after her. He wanted to look at the world in the same way she did. He couldn't give that up just yet.

That was why he put a stopper on his heart.

So he closed his mouth. He could only move forwards; biting down on his teeth and suppressing his feelings.

<Maybe I'm just scared of touching Misaki, but…>

There was a sense of loneliness that was carried over by Jin's voice. Sorata felt that Jin wasn't talking to him, but to himself. So he didn't even think of asking what Jin meant.

<Well, that's how things are. I'll leave Misaki with you for a while.>

"I can't do anything."

<Someone who's not able to do anything wouldn't invite girls to his house.>

"That's not what I want to ask. I just want you and Misaki-senpai to work things out!"

<Don't ask me to do something that you can't do, Sorata.>

Jin's voice was kind. Yet Sorata could feel the firm rejection at the same time.

"I think if it's you, you can do it, Jin-senpai."

Jin didn't reply to what Sorata said. He returned to his usual self and said,

<The former student council president will be jealous if I'm on the phone with you for a long time, so I'm hanging up.>

Before Jin hung up with a sigh, the former student council president's complaint <Don't be ridiculous.> could be heard.

Three minutes after the call ended, Yuuko came to his room; telling him that dinner was ready.

Sorata's mother must've chosen something Fukuoka-like, because their dinner was a Hot Pot with a soy sauce base and with a lot of chives. Father, mother, Yuuko, Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki sat around the hotpot and Sorata introduced each other.

While they spent the dinner time talking about this year's culture festival or about special edition breads at the bakery, Sorata's father and mother came to accept Mashiro, Nanami and Misaki naturally. Since the Kanda household used to live near Suimei High, the conversation flowed without any misunderstanding.

The only one who complained was Yuuko. She refused to yield the seat next to Sorata and she argued with Mashiro before the meal.

"The seat next to Onii-chan belongs to me."

"That's my special seat."

And sparks flew between them like this.

"It's been a year, so why don't you let her take the seat, Mashiro?"

If Nanami didn't soothe Mashiro, the fight would've continued until now.

"Here, Onii-chan, eat some chives."

Yuuko smiled happily sitting next to Sorata, as she piled some chives onto his plate. She had her chair right next to his, and it was uncomfortable how their shoulders were bumping. But Yuuko seemed to be enjoying it…

"You're just giving me the food that you don't want."

Sorata felt like he was eating five times as much chive for a piece of intestine for a while now.

"No. This is Yuuko's way of showing her appreciation."

"Does my sister think of me as a chive-liker…"

He didn't know what was going on anymore. He didn't know, but Sorata couldn't afford to focus solely on Yuuko.

Mashiro, who was seated opposite to him, had been sending unpleasant glares to him ever since they started to have their meal.

It seemed like Mashiro also wanted to give away chives to Sorata, but the table was surprisingly large so her hand wasn't able to reach all the way across. So Nanami was taking care of Mashiro's chives with a slightly tired expression.

Well, it did taste good though.

There were some marinated pollock roes as a side dish and some Champon noodles were added to the Hot Pot in the end. Thanks to that, Sorata was very full when he finished eating.

As soon as the meal was over, his father stood up and left the living room saying that he was going to take a bath.

"He's just shy being around so many young girls."

Smiling as she said that, his mother stood up to do some laundry.

"Ah, let me help you."

Nanami gathered up the utensils and followed after Sorata's mother.

"Oh my, thank you. It seems like Sorata found himself a bride."

Sorata was drinking water at that time, so he ended up spurting that out. The spray hit Yuuko's face head on.

"Whoa! H-Hot! No, it's not hot! No, what are you doing, Onii-chan?!"

“W-What are you saying, mum?!”

“T-To say that I’m Kanda’s… b-bride…”

“A-Anyway, don’t you think you’re being rude to Aoyama.”

He wiped Yuuko’s face with a towel and calmed himself.

“…It’s not that rude.”

Nanami spoke quietly.

“Hmm?”

“N-Nothing.”

“I’m sorry that my son is like this.”

“N-Not at all!”

Nanami blushed as she started to do the dishes with Sorata’s mother.

“Sorata, you want a bride?”

“I-If you’re going to get married to my Onii-chan, t-then you need to defeat Yuuko first!”

Yuuko clung onto Sorata’s arm.

Mashiro slightly puffed up her cheeks. Now it was becoming troublesome as she was too cute. Anyhow, Sorata looked away to fight back his feelings. If he was shaken by something like this, was he really going to be OK in the future…?

“You’re supposed to be on my roster.”

“Shiina-san, that’s a bit…”

Nanami was working hard behind stage, but there wouldn't be a point if things were revealed.

"Onii-chan, what's she saying? Tell Yuuko too."

"Going all dere-dere."

"I'm not! She's just my sister!"

"So clumsy."

"Now you're really spouting off!"

"Don't ignore Yuuko!"

Yuuko tugged at Sorata's arm.

"It's nothing, so you don't need to worry about it."

He patted her head to soothe her. Yuuko would cheer up whenever he did that.

"O-Onii-chan, it's embarrassing in front of other people."

Yuuko somewhat happily leaked out giggles as she was tickled. Gaining some confidence from that, Yuuko looked straight at Mashiro and boldly said,

"This is how close Onii-chan and I are. I don't plan to let you get closer even by a millimetre, Mashiro. Right, Onii-chan?"

"I can't agree to that."

"There's no need to be shy. I was born as a little sister to act charming to you."

"I don't remember being born as an older brother to put up with your childish acts, though!"

“A-Anyway, you have to give up on my Onii-chan, Mashiro.”

Mashiro didn’t bat an eyelid at Yuuko’s tough act and her declaration of war. She simply continued to blink at her usual pace.

Then pausing for a moment, she spoke slowly.

“Alright.”

“I-I done it, Onii-chan!”

Unlike the celebrating Yuuko, Sorata had a bad feeling about this. It was difficult to tell with Mashiro’s emotionless expression, but she was enough to be described as really selfish and she really hated losing. He didn’t think that things would end here. There was no way it was going to end like this.

“It’s a fight with Sorata as the prize.”

Mashiro stood up from her chair.

“A-Are you saying that you won’t give up on my Onii-chan?”

It looked like the “Alright” had been to show her will to fight.

“I can’t live without Sorata.”

“Y-Yuuko can’t either!”

Yuuko also stood up with a <I accept your challenge> type of feeling.

“I’m going to prove that I need Sorata.”

“Y-Yuuko needs brother as well!”

“Wait, wait, calm and sit down! Huh? Shiina?”

“I calmly considered it and I firmly refuse.”

“Hmm, you’re really calm.”

Having finished talking to Sorata, Mashiro and Yuuko faced each other. And they started to hurl dangerous confessions at each other.

“Sorata prepares my panties every day.”

The sound of time freezing resounded inside Sorata’s head.

“H-Hey! Shiina, what are you saying?!”

“O-Onii-chan washed Yuuko here and there every day during baths as well!”

“Yuuko, you idiot!”

“…Hoo, during baths, huh?”

Washing the dishes continuously without stopping, Nanami coldly spoke.

“You two lived together… until Kanda was a senior in middle school and Yuuko was a freshman in middle school? I really don’t think that’s right…”

“No, no, that was only until primary school so don’t put on a straight face like that! And Yuuko, don’t exaggerate!”

“Sorata wakes me up every morning. And brushes my hair. He even blow-dries my hair after a shower. Sorata launders my pyjamas, underwear and uniform as well. Sorata also packs my lunch.”

Yuuko shrank back at the revealment one after another.

“T-That much?! Y-Yuuko slept with Onii-chan everyday!”

“No, you can’t say everyday.”

“Hmm, so you two did sleep together sometimes...”

“No, no, that was when we were young as well.”

Even as Sorata made an excuse, he could no longer muster up the courage to look Nanami in the eyes.

“That aside, aren’t the two of you trying to murder me socially instead of having a competition between Shiina and Yuuko? I’m begging you, stop it!”

“That’s not possible.”

“No can do!”

Mashiro and Yuuko spoke in unison.

“There are battles in life that must not be avoided.”

Yuuko spoke bombastically with a troubled tone behind her voice.

“For me, this is a fight that I must avoid at the cost of my life!”

“Sorata even picked out my battle panties.”

“B-Battle panties?!”

Blushing furiously, Yuuko was taken back and opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish.

“Out! That’s something completely out there! Can someone please cut this scene out!”

“It’s a live broadcast, so that’s impossible, Kanda.”

Nanami returned to the table after finishing the dishes.

“I-I can’t take it anymore. I-If it’s like this, then I have to take out my hidden weapon.”

“Yuuko, you don’t even have anything to take on! That’s why people say young people these days are so impatient!”

“O-Onii-chan and I are not related by blood!”

“Don’t add plots on a whim! Don’t lie! This lie is unbelievable!”

“B-But Mashiro has been exaggerating for a while now as well! Why are you doing this to me! It’s unfair!”

“…”

“…”

Not being able to reply straight away, Sorata clamped subconsciously. Mashiro probably didn’t realise it, but she also closed her mouth. Misaki, watching TV while being seated on the sofa across it, slurped her tea.

The silence created the profound blank. And by a miracle, the blank was quite harmonious.

“W-Why did you stop talking?”

It seemed like Yuuko finally realised something.

“H-Huh? Really? N-No way… it’s a lie, right?!”

“O-Of course it is. There’s no way that can be true.”

Even when he desperately tried to smile, his face froze up. His voice sounded dry.

What appeared on Yuuko’s expression after being surprised and realising something was a look of horror.

“S-So what Mashiro said until now, all of those were true?!”

“It’s true.”

“Shiina!”

“M-Mum~! T-T-There’s something wrong with Onii-chan!”

“It’s completely true.”

“I’m so sorry, Shiina! I apologise, so please do what I say!”

“That’s not possible.”

“Even when I’m begging you like this?!”

“Because lying is bad.”

“I would like to think that there are such things as white lies!”

“I think it’s too late anyway…”

Nanami, seated next to Mashiro, was certainly right. She sat there dumbfounded.

“Someone please press the rewind button for my life! Or someone invent me a time machine!”

“Are you going out with Mashiro, Sorata?”

His mother asked as she placed the plates back into the cupboard.

“I-I’m not going out with her.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it calmly next time?”

Even in a situation like this, his mother was smiling happily for some reason. No, there hadn't even been a time when Sorata saw his mother angry. When his father returned quite late one night after a long drinking session, she was smiling just like right now. However, Sorata felt like he could recall his father kneeling in front of his mother with a tie wrapped around his head…

"Y-You leave me no choice but to execute my Plan A! Yuuko will apply for Suimei High!"

"Ohh, isn't that surprising~."

Sorata didn't have the energy to retort energetically.

"I'm going to barge into Suimei High and protect Onii-chan from Mashiro!"

"Then I'm going to use Plan C on Yuuko[4]."

"Annihilation is forbidden!"

He looked at Nanami's expression. Not knowing why Sorata was looking at her, Nanami quietly showed her questioning look to him. Ignorance is bliss. She would have no way of knowing that there was a murderous plot to assassinate her before. That was Plan C.

"The stake that sticks out must be hammered down."

"Don't worry, Shiina. With Yuuko's school grades, her claim is nothing but a fantasy."

"I'm serious!"

Becoming tired all of a sudden, Sorata stepped away from the table and sat next to Misaki who was quietly watching TV. Tomorrow's weather forecast was playing on the screen.

"Fukuoka's sunny tomorrow as well, huh?"

"What? Yuuko's talk about the entrance exam is over?!"

"Yes, it's over. It's over before it even started."

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[4] Please refer to Volume 2 Chapter 2 Part 1.

“Ehh~, just now I told it up to… huh? I think I didn’t finish though?”

“Yuuko, your father is against you applying for Suimei High.”

Sorata’s mother joined in as she left the kitchen.

Now that Sorata thought about it, there was no way that his father who doted on Yuuko would allow her to go to a far away school so easily. He didn’t even buy her a phone.

“So you need to convince him, Onii-chan.”

“How did it get to that?”

“Anyway, no food for you until you convince dad, Onii-chan.”

“Why don’t you say that after you attempt to help mum.”

Nanami was the one who helped instead…

“O-Onii-chan needs to defeat him!”

“Can’t you defeat him yourself?”

“I’m too busy defeating Mashiro. The fight that I can’t afford to lose at all costs has begun!”

“Can’t you give up on that fight? I’m the one who’ll be troubled by this, though.”

“It’s OK, Sorata.”

“When the situation isn’t OK right now?”

His strength escaped from him.

“Things should wrap up soon.”

“I-I won’t lose! So cheer up, Onii-chan! Defeat dad!”

He didn't want to confront his dad and talk to him face to face if possible. The dislike of doing such a thing aside, it just felt uncomfortable to him.

As he was thinking those thoughts, his father came out after finishing his bath to get some beer.

When Sorata turned around noticing his presence,

"I won't allow you to sit the entrance exam for Suimei High."

His father said so as he poured himself a glass of beer.

It seemed like his father had been listening to them. Well, that wasn't surprising considering how loudly they were talking.

"I won't allow it even if the world splits in half. That's final."

Ending the talk like that, his father finished drinking the beer from the glass and headed towards the bedroom straight away.

Sorata and Yuuko wordlessly watched their father's back. They literally weren't able to say a thing.

"…"

"…"

"Then I guess I'll go to my room as well."

His body wouldn't be able to handle being in this situation for much longer. He was just about to go insane. Wishing that these things would end, he tried to leave the living room when his mother smiled and confirmed something with him.

"Sorata, I hope you haven't forgotten the promise to calmly talk about this some time."

“Y-Yes. I remember.”

He sighed deeply inside his heart. Was he really going to be able to face the New Year safely at this rate? There was the <Let’s Make a Game> presentation that Sorata had to give after the New Year, so Sorata had to prepare for that during the winter holidays. That took Sorata’s first priority.

However, it was just one trouble after another. The problems were hidden deep in the mountains. He wasn’t even sure if he could resolve them all.

However, Sorata was well aware that no good would come from worrying.

“I just need to do it now.”

His voice echoed as he walked up the stairs.

That day, Sorata wrote the following in his heart's diary:

— Spent three hours kneeling. Explaining about Shiina to mum was the hardest thing that I had to do today…

Chapter 2

New Year's Festival Atmosphere

Mashiro and Yuuko's fight for Sorata inflicted him with a lot of mental damage. But the next day, Sorata straightened himself up and started to seriously prepare for the presentation.

"Alright, let's do this!"

Now was the long-awaited winter holiday. He had all the time in the world as he didn't need to go to school.

Locking himself up in his room from morning, he reread his proposal and thought about the flow of the explanations. He considered the order of his points, fleshed out points that were lacking and deleted anything that he felt were unnecessary.

Once the outline was decided, he had to prepare the cue cards. He had time to work with, but that didn't mean that he had time to spare; he had to clear away each step one by one.

This was the chance that he received after many failed submissions. He couldn't let it go to waste.

"I will produce a good result this time."

The presentation… the one he gave towards the end of summer last time didn't bring the result that he wanted but rather left him unsatisfied and regretful. It was a wakeup call for him and he realised how immature and shallow his thoughts were.

"One miserable experience is more than enough."

So this time, he was going to prepare perfectly and give the perfect presentation.

That was what Sorata imposed onto himself.

However, unlike Sorata's passion, he couldn't really say that he was making a smooth progress even after the third day (the night of 28th) of trying.

The reason lied with two people who visited his room every day.

"Brother, stop making such a serious expression and come play with Yuuko."

Yuuko was nagging him to play with her from morning till night. It was even worse when they actually lived together.

"Let's have a shower together, brother."

Is what she said yesterday, and she even followed him to the toilet this morning. His sister wouldn't separate herself from her brother.

He knew why Yuuko was acting this way. Mashiro. Even now as Sorata was going over the proposal on his bed, she had her face plastered onto Sorata's back. Yuuko obviously didn't enjoy that and her fighting spirit was on fire.

"Mashiro, get away from my brother."

"You get away, Yuuko."

"Both of you, don't fight."

"Whose side are you on, brother!"

"He's on my side."

"What did you say?!"

"I'm not on anyone's side!"

And this conversation was being repeated over and over again.

With three people on the bed, it was cramped and it was unbearable. However, the process of the two girls following Sorata wouldn't change even if he relocated to somewhere else. Yesterday, when he moved to the seat in front of the desk, three of them ended up sharing a chair.

This was continuously happening ever since he got back to Fukuoka.

As a result, Sorata's surroundings were always noisy. He wanted to share some of this noise to the let down Misaki.

Day by day, Misaki started to talk more than the previous. She recovered up to a level where she would reply back to Sorata or Nanami when they talked to her. However, she didn't take any actions on her own and spent most of the day sun bathing and playing with Komachi.

Speaking of Nanami, she had been helping Sorata's mother with the housework ever since she came to Fukuoka. Everything including cleaning, laundry, cooking and doing the dishes. She even went to a nearby supermarket during lunch to buy the groceries with him. Sorata also accompanied her as the porter.

On their way, he told her that she didn't need to help out, but Nanami replied she preferred it this way.

"Aoyama, isn't your academy audition not too far away?"

"I suppose that's why I'm helping; if I keep myself busy, then I can distract myself. I start to have negative thoughts whenever I have time."

"Don't you need to prepare for it or do some practicing?"

“I’m preparing my heart.”

“But really, how does the audition go?”

“Usually, there are three parts. First is reciting a set piece. We’ll get the script maybe sometime early next year.”

“Hmm~m.”

“Second part is just a normal act. But it’s almost a solo act because it’s quite short. Similar to the reciting part, we’ll get the script as well.”

“And the third?”

“I heard we have to do an ad-libbed performance about a topic given on the spot. And apparently, the topics will be all different and we’ll choose by lottery.”

“The last one sounds difficult.”

“Yeah. It’s not something that I can practice for, so I have to leave it to luck. But I think all performers should have adaptability to these things. I suppose they’re trying to test out potential.”

“I see… so that means you can only prepare your heart for now.”

“Did you think that I was only helping with the housework because I was stressed out?”

“No, not really.”

He did think that though…

“Your tone bothers me for some reason. But yeah. I want to prepare right now if I could, but I can’t. And wouldn't that worry me even

further? But it's true that helping Kanda's mum is calming my nerves."

"I guess that's OK then. Mum seems to be happy as well."

After the talk, Sorata decided to respect Nanami's intentions. Sorata knew how hard it was to calm his nerves as he was battling with some himself. He knew the feeling of the invisible pressure creeping up.

Mashiro, with her nonchalant expression, must've started to concentrate because she didn't show any reaction to what Yuuko was saying next to her. Leaning on Sorata's back, she was scratching away with her pencil on the sketchbook for her manuscript.

Yuuko, who was playing with a portable gaming device, must've thought that this was her chance because she made a move on Sorata.

"Brother, this one is strong! Defeat it for me!"

He couldn't be bothered comforting her, so he quickly defeated the foe.

And after that, she continuously asked

"What should I do here?"

Or,

"What attacks does this guy have?"

Nagged him like so, or

"Play with Yuuko~."

Bothered him so much that he could not possibly work on the presentation preparation. The accumulated stress grew and grew inside him.

And his patience ran out faster than expected. No, he was proud of himself for even putting up with her for the past 3 days when he didn't have time to spare for his preparation for the presentation.

"Yuuko's bored because brother's not paying any attention."

Yuuko kept tugging at his arm. That was the trigger.

"Ah~, geez! Stop bothering me!!"

"Kyaa!"

When Sorata suddenly raised his voice, Yuuko let out a strange yell. The papers that Sorata threw as he yelled came fluttering down.

"I've got things to do over this holiday!"

"And Yuuko also wants to play with brother a lot over the holidays."

"Play? Will you be fine with the entrance exams?"

"Um….."

"Didn't you say that you'll study at Suimei High next year?"

"Right now… I'm just resting."

Yuuko bowed her head and grumbled. Sorata haven't seen Yuuko studying even once ever since he returned.

"Being so blunt hurts people you know! Brother's an idiot!"

Yuuko's eyes were teary as she snapped her head up. She tried to push Sorata away with her hands, but she was far too weak to do so and she ran out of Sorata's room without achieving anything.

The door closed with a slam.

"Haa."

He naturally sighed. His concentration got cut off.

Even in a situation like this, Mashiro didn't lift her head from the sketch book. She was absorbed in her work.

"That part about you is really amazing."

Of course, there wasn't a response from Mashiro.

Feeling encouraged from Mashiro, Sorata collected the pages of the proposal that he threw.

Moving to the table now, he turned on the laptop that he borrowed from Misaki. He utilised the time for the laptop to turn on by looking over the parts that he intended to fix.

Afterwards, he spent a lot of time typing away at the keyboard.

Since his presentation layout was already laid out, it didn't take too much time and after an hour, the materials started to come together. Now, he wanted to shorten the part where he explains the flow of the game as he was concerned about it.

And with that, he had done what he intended to do.

He thought that things were now much easier to understand and look over. Including the illustration that he asked of Mashiro to do, he was able to delete some extra explanation parts. But how much did he need to polish up before it would be ready for the

presentation? Would he be able to reach the perfection that he had in mind? As he didn't know where that perfection laid, he only grew nervous as he continued to work and the restless feelings were all over the lower half of his body.

Choosing to ignore those feelings, Sorata leaned backwards while still being seated.

He saw an upside down image of Mashiro reading over her manuscript. She had a serious expression. He could see the unwavering spirit in her.

"By the way Shiina."

There was a fifty-fifty chance of her replying back.

"What is it?"

Mashiro's eyes were still focused on the manuscript.

"Will you be OK for the third chapter manuscript? It'll be on the magazine next month as well, right?"

The magazine came out every month on the 20th. It was apparently OK for a chapter to be late by a week before the deadline, but that's not the actual schedule. It would be bad if the chapter wasn't sent through before the year was over.

"Already done. I sent it to Ayano."

"Ah, really?"

"Ever since I hurt my finger…. I've been sending them on time."

When Mashiro looked at Sorata with an expectant look, Sorata straightened himself up, spun the chair around and faced the bed.

“I see. Yeah… that’s how Shiina should be.”

“… Yeah.”

“….”

“….”

Mashiro didn’t look away even when their conversation was over. Her hand stopped flipping over the sketchbook pages.

“W-What?”

“Is this right?”

“Huh?”

“The me that Sorata likes.”

“Woah! You…”

Although he was in the mood because that time was the night on Christmas Eve, he really did say some outrageous things.

— I liked you from that time onwards

That appearance of solely running towards the goal she wanted to achieve without being distracted….

“Answer me.”

Sorata tried to just mumble over it, but he was stopped by Mashiro.

“…”

Mashiro was looking at him. Her crystal clear eyes were looking at him. Usually, her eyes would be shining with certainty but now, her confidence seemed to be wavering in her eyes. She looked uncertain. But that could be all just in Sorata’s head.

So Sorata could only reply honestly.

“Y-Yeah.”

“I’m glad.”

Relieved, Mashiro slightly loosened her mouth area. He wouldn’t have noticed if he wasn’t paying attention, but Sorata still noticed it.

When he saw Mashiro like so, the feelings he thought he bottled up peeked out from the lid. With only two of them in the room, it wasn’t so simple to ignore his wishes to talk to Mashiro about something else or touch her skin. However, he knew now was not the time. He had to concentrate on the presentation.

“You’re too perfect. You know…”

His voice was too soft; Mashiro didn’t hear his voice. No, she might have heard it. But that didn’t make a difference. Mashiro’s expression was slightly soft but she was already concentrating on her work.

He might just be being arrogant in thinking that he won’t lose to her. However, that brought forth a warm energy from within. That was a very good thing.

Sorata sat up straight at the table again and operated the laptop to change it to a slide show. He started to prepare the cue-cards by reading his points out loud.

Purpose of the proposal, outline of the game, concept, target and source of benefit were laid out in an easy-to-follow manner.

He was thinking about giving a presentation tomorrow to Nanami and Misaki when he finish making the cue-cards and improving it further.

"…. But will it become perfect like that?"

The question Sorata muttered out made him feel even more frustrated. He wondered if he was just repeating the failure that he had before.

Looking back at the presentation during the summer, he felt that he didn't hit off with the judges. Although he went through a mental blank during the presentation, he was able to talk about the main points till the end… but the judges didn't show any responses.

"Maybe I did something wrong…"

If so, then what did he do wrong? It was hard to find something that was visible with his mind alone.

Not being able to stand sitting still for any longer, Sorata stood up and started to pace around the small room. Whenever he thought of something he stopped on the spot but only continued to walk about thinking that it wasn't something he was looking for.

As he did so, Mashiro called him.

"Sorata."

"Hmm?"

"Are you pretending to be a monkey?"

"As if I would!"

"So an orangutan then."

“I’m not!”

He paced around for half an hour trying to think of something, but nothing would come to mind.

“I should seek help from someone in a situation like this.”

Thinking alone would direct him to the wrong direction.

The only one who he could trust was his classmate and his next door dorm-mate in Sakurasou—Ryuunosuke Akasaka. Despite being a well known programmer, Ryuunosuke had a weakness. And that was presenting something. He excelled at communicating via technology, but he found it difficult to talk to people in real life.

But he didn’t have anyone else to lean on.

Sorata opened the chat program and found Ryuunosuke’s account.

Thankfully, Ryuunosuke was logged on at the moment.

—Akasaka, do you have some time?

—Master Ryuunosuke is currently doing so-so

The one who replied was the automatic reply program AI, Maid-chan. The program was updated almost daily with expanding capabilities and like so, it was even capable of chatting.

—What do you mean, so-so?!

—Huh, that’s strange. I was taught that that was an appropriate term to use when there’s something people cannot be bothered to explain.

—There are no convenient functions like that, and you just said you couldn’t be bothered didn’t you?!

Can a maid really neglect her duties? While she was becoming more and more human like, Sorata felt that the maid was getting more and more unnecessary features. What was Ryuunosuke trying to create?

—Oh my, Master Sorata. That just now was a joke of course. It was just a high level Maid-chan's joke. That's just common knowledge between us Maid-World.

—What's a Maid-World? You sure you don't mean the Nether World?[5]

—So, what did you wish to talk to me about today?

—So you're going to ignore my question? I see.

—I will continue to reply as I swat away the mails a certain foreign pest is sending.

So she was still at war with Rita…

—To say it bluntly, it's because of <Let's make a game> presentation.

—The presentation.

—Yes, that's right. I am preparing for it, but I am slightly hesitant as I am not sure on what makes a presentation good.

—Then why don't you think about it in someone else's shoes?

—Someone else's shoes?

—If Master Sorata was the person listening to the presentation, how would you judge a presentation that you hear?

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[5] Pun on Maid-World(Meido kei) and Nether World(Meido kei)

—I see, so that's how you meant.

—This doesn't necessarily apply only to presentations, but the key to success lies in being able to understand how the other person feels. In the presentation's case, do you know how you should be thinking?

—I'm sorry. But could you teach me just in case?

—Well, to put it simply, let's see. I think it's important to include things that <others are interested in>.

—Ahh, I see.

That aside, he was very impressed at Maid-chan's capability and extent of knowledge. She probably knew even more than Sorata…. She used to be dumber when Sorata first came to Sakurasou….

"Something that others are interested in… huh."

It certainly sounded agreeable. The chances of someone liking what you liked was definitely low. After all, people had different interests.

—Can't the same be said about everyday lives? If there's something in common, it becomes easier to talk to someone and you might even befriend them. On the contrary, it would take a long time for people to understand each other if they have different tastes.

He felt like he understood slightly better now. He knew where to head at least. If he could do this well, he should be able to improve his presentation contents.

—Thanks, Maid-chan.

—It wasn't worthy of being thanked for.

—No, it was really informative. I would like to thank you if I could.

—Really? Then I would like to ask something from Master Sorata.

—What is it?

—Could you fly to England and bury someone?

She asked a frightening request.

—Sorry, I don't work in that field.

—Oh, my. I'm being serious of course.

—You should say that you were joking in a situation like this!

—I'll be expecting your result.

—You're talking about the presentation results, right?

Maid-chan didn't reply. An automatic log out feature must've been added.

"Let's just pretend that I didn't read the last parts."

Repeating that to himself in his heart, Sorata closed the chat program.

He was able to hear some valuable advice. He had to make use of them.

"Something that others are interested in…"

That was a good way of thinking about things. Now he had to think of <what> that was.

He twisted his head while 'hmmm'ing. Taking out a notepad, he wrote down some words and phrases that he thought of. Game,

proposal content, fun, target, concept, benefit, play style, system, controls… those were already on the proposal.

He spent an hour mulling over these things.

"…. I don't know."

Using the backrest as a support, he looked up at the ceiling. Mashiro whom he could see out of the corners of his eyes was still sitting down and drawing quietly.

Hearing a knock, Sorata turned his attention to the door.

"Come in."

After a short moment, the door creaked open. It was Yuuko who poked her head through the gap.

"B-Brother, do you have a moment?"

"What for?"

"U-Um… sorry about before."

"It's alright, I'm not angry anymore."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I did get angry at you and I'm sorry."

"No, it was Yuuko's fault for bothering. But, um… could I ask for a favour from you, brother?"

"Favour?"

The door slowly opened further.

"Um, so."

She still must be concerned about the yell, because she was hesitant on speaking.

“I’m really not angry, and I won’t get mad at you, so tell me.”

“Y-Yeah. Could you teach me?”

At a closer look, Yuuko was hugging a maths workbook in front of her chest.

“There are parts that I don’t understand.”

“You sure you don’t mean it’s full of parts that you don’t understand?

When Sorata teased her, Yuuko laughed unhappily.

“I-I know some parts.”

“Some parts. Well, OK. I can teach you.”

It might be good for a change of mood.

“Really? Hurray~! Then let’s do it in Yuuko’s room.”

After stomping into Sorata’s room, Yuuko tugged at his arm. When she looked at Mashiro’s eyes, Yuuko didn’t forget to growl at her.

“Hurry, hurry.”

Sorata was dragged out of the room by Yuuko. And he was dragged to Yuuko’s room next door.

Mashiro quickly followed behind them and made herself comfortable on Yuuko’s bed without paying any attention to either Sorata or Yuuko.

“Why did Mashiro come as well!”

“Because Sorata’s here.”

“W-What a convincing reason…”

Yuuko quickly became disheartened; unable to retort.

“Huh? How’s that convincing?”

It seemed like Mashiro and Yuuko had coinciding views about aspects that Sorata wasn’t aware about.

Anyway, it’s been a while since Sorata last went inside his sister room. When he looked around to see if anything has changed, he didn’t see anything different than before. There were a lot of dolls. The Shoujo mangas that she liked and collected were all packed on the bookshelf. And among those manga magazines, there was something that Sorata was familiar with.

He reached out for it and flipped through the pages. There was no doubt. It was the magazine that Mashiro’s manga is serialised in.

“Hey Yuuko.”

“What is it?”

“Which manga do you find interesting in this magazine?”

“Hm~m, my pick for now is this one.”

Yuuko flipped through the pages of the magazine on Sorata’s hands. The page she stopped at was surprisingly Mashiro’s manga.

“It’s drawn by Mashiro Shiina-sensei. There’re only 2 chapters out but the art works are so pretty. The story is slightly rough around the edges, but this will become a big hit for sure!”

“R-Really?”

"… H-Huh? Now that I think about it, she has the same name as Mashiro."

"Well, she is the mangaka for this manga after all."

"Heh~, I see."

"…"

"…"

Yuuko blinked as she stood still while looking up at Sorata's face.

And her lips began to shake, then,

"Ehh~! Mangaka?!"

She yelled in surprised.

"W-What did you say? Huh? You're kidding~, no way…"

"Shiina, show her your drawings."

Replying with her eyes, Mashiro flipped over the sketchbook and showed them an illustration of a character. The illustration was penned over the faint lines, so it was enough to be mistaken for a real manuscript.

"Is she really, really her?!"

"Yeah."

"Amazing! I look up to you! I'm your fan! Ah, I do like your manga, but I don't like you, because you're trying to seduce my brother!"

"What are you saying."

"So please give me your autograph!"

"Where did that 'so' come from?"

Mashiro took the notepad that Yuuko offered and gave her an autograph. She even drew the main character as well.

"Amazing~! So fast~! Amazing~!"

Yuuko was moved.

"Are you mimicking a fast food store commercial?"

"But I'm not giving you my brother."

"Like I said, what are you saying? I have the say about my possession. Isn't that so?"

"Wow~, I'm so touched~, so amazing~. But my brother is a no-go!"

Yuuko was busy going from being moved, intimidating, and respect then to being on guard.

"Hey Yuuko. What about your studies?"

"Please teach me!"

Yuuko sat in front of the desk after doing a salute pose. Next to her, Sorata took a folding chair and sat with the back facing the front. Mashiro wordlessly resumed her work. She probably didn't pay any attention to what Yuuko said anyway.

On the workbook that Yuuko opened, there were unexpected traces of studying done. There were traces of some things being written and there were parts where it was simply dirtied. Sorata knew Yuuko as someone who doesn't study even before a test. She used to be not be able to sit at the desk for longer than 5 minutes.

He glanced at the bookshelf on the desk. Aside from mathematics, there were English, Japanese, science and society reference books as well as workbooks. Half of them were books that Sorata used. While

Yuuko was solving a practice question, Sorata took out a workbook from the shelf.

He flipped through the pages. There were traces of writing on it. Surprisingly, she seemed to be working hard for the entrance exam. She must've been serious when she said that she wanted to get into Suimei High.

But by the looks of it, she seemed to be struggling with some practice question at 1st year, middle school students so she had a lot of work to do to be accepted into Suimei high.

As a special school that was associated with an arts university, there were a lot of applicants from other prefectures and the competition was five times as much as last year. Tested subjects were English, mathematics, Japanese, science and society as well as an interview.

For the immature Yuuko, interview would be a great stress on her.

However, he didn't want to say those negative thoughts out loud and discourage Yuuko's positive thoughts.

"Hey Yuuko."

"What is it?"

Yuuko raised her head as she wrestled with mathematics.

"When's the Suimei High entrance exam?"

"13th of February. It's on Valentine Eve, so I'll give you some heart-filled chocolate then!"

"Don't make up strange dates. And give your heart-filled chocolates to father. He'll weep with happiness."

Maintaining a stern attitude, Sorata glanced at Mashiro working silently. Would he finally be able to receive chocolate from someone outside his family? Realising what he just subconsciously thought about, Sorata shook his head and denied his feelings.

"But Yuuko, there's only about a month until the exam. Will you be fine if you're revising 1st year material now?"

"So you need to teach me about some questions, brother. You did get accepted with that, right?"

She smiled like a fool, so he gave her a chop on the head to start.

"It hurts!"

"I did study up to a certain extent as well."

"Eh~, but Yuuko haven't seen brother studying at all."

"That's because I studied after you were well asleep."

That was actually true. He was reminded about the times when his mother brought him snacks late at night.

"Now, continue studying."

"But you were the one who asked first, brother."

"Sorry about that."

While giving hints to Yuuko who started to wrestle with mathematics questions again, Sorata placed the workbook back on the shelf.

After helping with Yuuko with her studies for a while, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Yuuko answered at the door.

Sorata thought it was his mother, but the person opened the door was actually Nanami. Mother must've asked her for a favour. Nanami held a plate with some late night snacks and tea.

"Can I come in?"

"You're probably the only one who would ask such a question."

Nanami slightly smiled at what he said.

"Then please excuse me."

Nanami placed the plate on a foldable table in the middle of the room. She sat at the table and poured some tea from the pot. Sorata mindlessly looked at the arising steam and then looked at the clock for no particular reason.

"It's already this late."

It was over 10 PM.

"Have something if you're hungry."

Sorata received the riceball from Nanami. He was planning on continuing his preparation, so Nanami's provision supplies came at a great time.

The stiff seaweed tasted good. The rice mixed with red mustard tasted like fried rice and it was a reminiscent taste for Sorata. It was something that Sorata's mother used to make for him when he was studying for entrance exams.

"It's been a while since the last time I had this."

"Wow~, thank you, Nanami."

Yuuko instantly stood up from the desk and ran to the table. She opened her mouth wide and took a bite from the riceball.

“Mashiro, do you want some if you’re not going to sleep just yet?”

“Yeah.”

When Sorata started to pay attention again, he noticed Mashiro putting down her pencil. She took small bites from the riceball that Nanami handed to her.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Aoyama?”

“I don’t have enough confidence to eat carbohydrates at this hour.”

She talked in a slightly sulky tone. She was definitely concerned about her weight. Even when she didn’t seem fat at all…

“Kanda, how’s the preparation going?”

“Hmm? Well, I think it’ll go smoothly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I received some advice from Akasaka, or rather, Maid-chan. There are still things that I need to consider, but I think things will go well if I can think of a good idea.”

“Hm~m. What was the advice?”

“She told me not to only talk about what I like but to talk about things that the judges want to hear.”

“… Ah~, I see.”

“So, I’ve got a question to ask. if you were a judge, what would you like to hear about in a presentation?”

“Me? Hm~m, not sure. I don’t know too much about games.”

"No, anything is fine, so I'll be grateful if you can say anything that you can think of. I did try to think about it, but I keep going around in circle. I guess I need someone else's opinion."

"In that case, hmm…. I think someone of a high position in a company would be interested in knowing whether or not the game will sell."

"Ah, now that you mention it."

He didn't consider about that because he was too preoccupied thinking about if the game was fun or not. Thinking about it normally, it definitely would be better to consider the selling points.

Not too long ago, he read an interview in a magazine that said "things won't sell just because it's fun"….

The judges will definitely be interested if he was to say that the game will be competitive at making profit.

But was that something that a game creator should think about? He felt that it was his job as one to promote the game design and entertainment—thinking about how the game would sell was a different story.

Also, why did he feel stuffy when he thought about how the game that he thought to be interesting would sell?

"…"

"Kanda?"

No, he thought it would be a waste to throw away an idea just because of some negative reasons. Now wasn't the time to be picky.

Also, he had to focus on making the game even more enjoyable if the game did go through the judges and be released as a proper game.

There were a lot of games that were fun but didn't sell well. It probably was obvious to talk about the vision of success that he had for the game at the presentation. He thought the selling points might be even more important than the entertainment aspect of the game itself.

Maybe that was the appeal of a game.

"Sorry, maybe I said something strange?"

"N-No, that actually was quite helpful."

He was really thankful that he was able to hear someone else's opinion at a time like this. If he relied only on his head, then the presentation would become skewed to one side.

"Yeah. I feel I can do it now."

"Then that's good,"

"That's quite an advice. Thanks, Aoyama."

"No, I think it's just a normal advice though."

Whenever Sorata thought about one thing for long hours, he often looked over those trivial things.

He must've been quite hungry, because he ate two riceballs while he talked.

"Thanks for the food."

"…."

When he sighed, he felt Nanami's gaze on him.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"…. Nothing."

"…"

"Nothing at all."

"Why did you say it twice?"

This meant that she had something to say. Looking down, Nanami slurped the tea from a cup.

"Riceballs."

"Riceballs?"

"How… were they?"

Nanami glanced at Sorata with eyes full of expectation.

"They were delicious."

"I see."

"Yeah, they were delicious."

"T-Then never mind…"

"But I still mind… ah! Did you add pepper paste to one of them?! Shiina, Yuuko, are you alright?"

"I didn't do that! Geez… is this what I get for making them?"

"Huh?"

"… I learnt how to make them, so I made them myself."

He didn't notice at all because the taste was so familiar to him. Without a doubt, he thought his mother made them.

"My mum made you do that? I'm really sorry."

"I did it because I wanted to, so it's really embarrassing if you thank me like that. Also, I'll be asking you to practice with me when the script for the audition comes out."

"I would help you with anything that I can even if I'm repaying you for the night snacks."

Nanami opened her eyes wide at what Sorata said.

"Is that really something to be surprised at?"

"Why?"

She asked with a serious expression this time.

"Well, because I want you to pass your auditions."

"Why?"

She asked the same question again.

"Because I've watched you work for it since year 1. And you even worked for your living fees and academy fees. Because I know all that."

He watched Nanami say "Sorry" countless of times whenever their classmate asked her to come with them to the karaoke after school and go on shopping trips on Sundays.

In that sense, Nanami also abandoned her ordinary high school life and worked hard, just like Mashiro. He wanted her to do well and

he didn't want to see her lose. He knew that he wouldn't be able to stand there watching her sad.

"Everyone at the academy works hard. It's not just me."

"Aoyama's the only one I know, so it's obvious for me to cheer you on."

"I see."

"…. But to be honest, maybe I'm doing this for myself."

As he talked, a thought sprang up in his mind.

"For yourself?"

"Maybe I want you to prove yourself to the world rather than having your efforts paid off."

"…"

Sorata realised that was his true feelings after he said it out loud.

"Sorry, I said something stupid, didn't I."

"No. Then I suppose I have to pass for Kanda's sake."

"But for yourself first, right?"

"Of course. That's why I tried this hard after all."

"Let's do our best."

"Yeah."

Sorata had the presentation and Nanami had the audition.

"…"

Noticing someone's gaze, they turned around to see Mashiro gazing at them. It seemed like she finished eating the riceball. Having finished eating, Yuuko was already back at the desk studying.

"What's the matter, Shiina?"

"Won't you ask me?"

"Huh?"

What did she mean?

"Are you talking about what you would do if you were a judge?"

"Yeah."

Mashiro appeared to be confident.

"Ohh, then have you got a good idea?"

"I don't."

"And yet you boldly decided to bring up the dead topic!"

"…"

Mashiro suddenly appeared to be upset.

"There was something that I said that made you upset, wasn't there."

"I'm not upset."

"I can tell that you're upset. It's hard to tell by your expressions, but I can tell to a certain degree these days."

"I just…."

"Just?"

"I want to do my best as well."

The room suddenly became quiet. Mashiro's words slowly sank in to his body.

He felt like she said something important. But what he replied was his ordinary feelings.

"But you're already doing more than your best."

"Yeah, I think so too."

Nanami agreed with him.

"No."

But Mashiro didn't agree with them.

"Different? In what way?"

"I want to be like Sorata and Nanami."

"Shiina…"

"…"

Mashiro bowed her head and looked down at the floor.

"There are a lot of things that I don't know about these days."

"… Mashiro."

Nanami desperately tried to think of something to say next to Sorata. However, she didn't seem to be able to think of an appropriate thing, because she looked at Sorata restlessly.

"I'm going to go to talk with Rita."

"Y-Yeah."

Mashiro stood up from the bed. Holding the sketchbook to her chest, she quietly left the room. She must've went to get her phone.

As soon as Mashiro left, Sorata's mother poked her head in through the door.

"Oh my, is she asleep?"

Wondering what his mother was talking about, Sorata looked at Yuuko; only to see her fast asleep. And drooling at that…

Looking at the clock, it was already past 11 o'clock.

"If it's this late, then I suppose it's quite late for Yuuko."

The Yuuko that Sorata knew slept at half past 9 every night.

"Yuuko's been studying till late these days."

"Really?"

"She's been studying till around midnight every day."

"Hm~m."

"Aren't you going to say something like <No way!>?"

"I can tell after looking at her reference books or workbooks that she's been studying."

It seemed like Yuuko didn't declare that she would go to Suimei High to rebel at Sorata after he brought his friends home. Yuuko must have her own reasons for wanting to go to that high school. He didn't think of that as strange.

Having grown up in that town, he and his sister knew about the Suimei High's charms. The students at that school appeared to be so happy even when they were students…. And Sorata knew that they weren't misunderstanding it. His world widened after entering high school. He had the shock of his life after being exiled to Sakurasou.

Now, he found a goal to work towards to. His high school was one full of excitement.

“But unfortunately, father is against Yuuko sitting the Suimei High entrance exams.”

“Why are you telling me that? If you ask father, he’ll agree to it straight away, mum.”

Anyway, his father wasn’t able to yell in front of his mother.

“Don’t you think a battle with a predictable outcome is no fun?”

Sometimes, he couldn’t understand his mum. She was usually graceful and gentle, but she had a firm view about some things.

“And didn’t Yuuko asked you to help, Sorata?”

“Then tell this to father. I’ve got something to say, so anytime is fine.”

“Sorata, you’re so weak against Yuuko.”

“There’s no need to say that.”

“Yes, yes.”

His mum appeared to be happy for some reason.

“Ah, that’s right. Nanami.”

“Ah, yes?”

Nanami leaned closer to Sorata’s mum when she signalled her with her hand.

“How were the riceballs?”

“H-He liked them.”

The two of them started to whisper something to each other.

“Hey Yuuko. If you’re going to sleep, then sleep in your bed.”

“Uuu~, I’m sleepy. I’ll wake up if you sleep with me, brother.”

“Don’t be silly.”

He slapped her head lightly.

“Ah~, whyyy? You used to sleep with me before.”

“Do you really think I can sleep with my sister now that she is in her 3rd year of middle school?”

“You’re too much, brother. Are you becoming aware of Yuuko?”

Yuuko appeared to be happy for some reason.

“No, there’s nothing to be aware about.”

“You haven’t even seen Yuuko’s mature parts yet.”

“Good, you opened your eyes at least. Go brush your teeth and lay down on the bed.”

“Eeek. To lead me on, that’s not fair!”

He didn’t really think that he was leading her on, or being unfair.

“B-But Mashiro is on the bed… she’s gone?!”

“Shiina went back to the guest room.”

By the looks of things, it seemed like the day was over.

Sorata said that he’ll go back to his room and pulled himself away from Yuuko.

“Mum, please tell what I said before to him.”

He repeated himself just in case before leaving the room.

“OK, I understand.”

“What’s it about, brother?”

“You’ll find out soon enough, so don’t expect anything and just wait.”

Saying that, Sorata left the room.

Nanami followed after him.

“You think you’re being too soft to your sister, aren’t you?”

“I think it’s better than being cold to her.”

After the short dialogue, Sorata and Nanami parted ways in front of his room.

He yawned.

But he wanted to continue working tonight. After all, he did see a possibility.

But as soon as he entered his room after firing himself up, Sorata stopped moving.

Mashiro was sleeping on his bed. She was curled up on it and was happily sleeping. In her two hands close to her chest was her opened phone. It looked dangerous being like that because it might accidently break while she moved around.

He took the phone from Mashiro’s hand. As he was about to close it, he saw a sentence on it.

— Sorata is cold.

It was something that he didn't want to see. What else were on phone? Should I take a peek at it? As the devil inside his heart whispered to him, the phone started to shake in his hand.

"Woah!"

Surprised, he nearly dropped the phone. It seemed like Rita just replied back. Thanks to that, Sorata straightened himself up and gently closed the phone; leaving it next to the bed.

He covered the sleeping Mashiro with a blanket.

"Hey, I'm not cold."

His opinion that didn't matter at all echoed around the silent room.

Mashiro was fast asleep. Realising that after glancing at her face, Sorata said

"N-Now then, let's prepare for the presentation."

And sat at the desk after saying that out loud.

But in the end, he wasn't able to concentrate as his mind was filled with Mashiro's messages.

Over the bathroom walls, he could hear the distant Watch-Night bells ringing. There were only minutes left until the end of the year.

The Kōhaku Uta Gassen[6] has already ended and Sorata was in the bathroom by himself—leaving the rest in the living room where they were eating Toshikoshi soba[7].

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[6] An annual music show on New Year's Eve produced by Japanese public broadcaster NHK. The show ends shortly before midnight.

"…. What should I do?"

He was racking his brains even as he blankly looked up at the ceiling while soaking in the bathtub.

It wasn't like he was worried about the presentation preparation. Thanks to Maid-chan and Nanami, he was already able to find a direction to work towards and he thought out his plans already. All that was left was to practice it repeatedly until he feels it's complete.

The presentation date was scheduled for the 7th of January, so he still had time to practice.

Even Yuuko, who had been running around him like a puppy, has settled down and concentrated on her studies from the 28th. So he shouldn't be disrupted by her. Furthermore, Nanami has taken over Yuuko's tutoring position since yesterday.

Yuuko did beg to be taught by Sorata, but after being taught by Nanami for around an hour,

"If its Nanami, then I think she could help Yuuko get into Suimei High."

And said so as her eyes sparkled. It seemed like Nanami's teaching style was quite good.

However, for Yuuko's efforts to pay off, she needed permission from their father to sit the Suimei High entrance exam. That was what Sorata was worrying about right now.

He had to convince his father, but he hasn't found the chance to talk to him as this time of the year was quite hectic.

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[7] Soba noodles eaten at the end of the year.

A crazy schedule waited for them on the New Years, and according to his mother, his father resumed working on the 4th, so January wasn't going to be very free.

I wanted to take care of it today…

"How troublesome…"

As he heard his own voice being echoed back from the ceiling, he noticed someone in front of the door. Who was it? As Sorata went on guard hoping that it wasn't Mashiro or Yuuko,

"Sorata."

It was his father's voice.

"W-What is it?"

"I'm coming in."

"What?"

Regardless of Sorata's surprise, his father opened the bathroom door.

"Whoaaa! You, what are you doing!"

Before his eyes stood a man in his mid-40s, stark naked without even covering his front.

"Cover your front at least!"

"Why?"

"Because I can see your embarrassing part!"

"There isn't a single place on my body that I am embarrassed about!"

After declaring so proudly, his father strongly walked into the bathroom, sat in front of the shower head, scooped up some water from the bathtub that Sorata was in and poured it over his body. He then used a shower towel to lather up some soap and started to wash himself animatedly.

"No, wait, what are you doing!"

"Can't you tell I'm washing my important part?"

"Who asked you to give a live report! No, what's going on here?! I'm finding it hard to accept the reality before my eyes right now! Someone tell me that I'm dreaming!"

"To say that you dream of having your father appear to you in your dream; is your head alright?"

"As if it is! This is no different to a nightmare!"

"Don't raise your voice in the bathroom. The echoes are driving me mad."

"It's too late for you to act sensible now!"

"What are you complaining about? Take some calcium. Eat some anchovies."

"I'm complaining about the whole entire situation! What did I do wrong to deserve a bath with father! And on the last night of the year at that!"

"Watch your words. If I had to take a bath with someone, then I would like to have one with Yuuko. But it's already been 4 years since she rejected me. After compromise after compromise, I have to put up with you."

“If it’s bearable, then don’t even come in! It’s so creepy! I also refuse! I’m so against it!”

“Don’t get so embarrassed.”

“My face is only getting flustered because of my rage! Use some common sense before you act!”

“Are you still caught up about such a worldly thing? How pathetic. You’re such a tightass.”

“Why are you trying to say some profound things while you’re washing your ass stark naked!”

“Wash your own ass.”

“Impossible, impossible, this is impossible! God! I can’t put up with such a trial for any longer!”

“Don’t say something like that. This might be the last chance for me to be in the same bathroom as you.”

“Are you going to leave because you discovered you had a dangerous illness after a health check-up or something? Please leave straight away!”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m healthy as a horse. When they took an x-ray of my stomach, I swallowed some barium once more without realising it, so the doctors even told me<Never come back>.”

“That means they told you to never come back because you’re a nuisance to them! How positive are you to take it that way! I’m begging you, don’t cause trouble to the people out there! It’s embarrassing.”

As if to avoid hearing bad things about him, his father started to wash his hair with the showerhead.

While Sorata was glad that things became quiet until his father finished washing his hair, his father tried to step into the bathtub that Sorata was in when he turned off the showerhead.

“Wait, wait, now hold on a moment! Are you trying to kill me!”

To be squashed in the narrow bathtub with his father; it would be a traumatic torture.

But his father wasn’t the type who would stop there. He held out his dirty ass towards Sorata.

“Your ass!”

Unwillingly, Sorata swapped places with his father and left the bathtub. Let’s leave the bathroom like this. Yes, that’s for the best. Why didn’t I do that? I should’ve just left. He lost his cool at his father’s appearance.

“Where do you think you’re going, Sorata.”

“I’m getting out!”

“I heard you had something to say. Your mother told me.”

“Huh? No, wait. Is that why you came in?”

“Whatever, just spill it out.”

“I would like to talk about it outside though.”

“Let me teach you a good lesson in life.”

“What might that be?”

“Chances don’t wait for people. If you let a chance slip away and give an excuse that you weren’t ready, that chance will not come back.”

“I would prefer it if you could tell me those types of things when both of us are dressed!”

He was saying some valuable things, but everything else was out of place.

“It’s about Yuuko.”

“I’m not handing my daughter over.”

“I’m your son! What do you think I’ll do with my blood related sister if I get her!”

“…”

“Huh, what’s with the silence?”

“… No.”

“Wait, you’re avoiding my gaze? Don’t tell me we’re not related? Was there a backstory behind my birth?”

“Unfortunately…”

“Really?!”

“You’re mine and your mother’s child.”

“Don’t say that it’s unfortunate! It’s even more unfortunate for me! Ah, but did you just say <you>? Then don’t tell me, Yuuko is…”

“Yes.”

“… No way.”

“She is mine and your mother’s child.”

“Why don’t we start things off after I hit you around six times!”

“That’s too much, knock some off that.”

“Could you not discount my rage?! More than that, can’t you treat me as a proper son?”

“As a man, how many times do you need to hear “Don’t say some creepy stuff” before you’re satisfied?”

“It feels 100 times worse to see you stepping into the bathroom!”

“In the end, what are you trying to say? You’re not making your topic clear.”

His father made a tired expression.

“Why do I feel like I’m in the wrong… anyhow, I’m talking about Yuuko’s entrance exams.”

“…”

“She seems to be studying hard, so won’t you let her sit for the Suimei High entrance exams? It would be difficult for her to be accepted with her grades anyway.”

“…”

“Don’t you think Yuuko would accept it if she sat the exam and didn’t make it? Also, won’t you be relieved if she goes to a high school here, father?”

“….”

“Right? Father?”

“You’ve gotten slightly finer.”

“What?”

His father’s gaze was directed at the lower part of his body as he said that.

“Where are you talking to!”

“It’s a son.”

“I’m asking you, please die now.”

“Is that how you should talk to your father?”

“But father, you were the one who talked to me like that!”

“I was complimenting you.”

“There won’t be a son who would be happy after being complimented by his father about that part! If I was a hamster, I would’ve died a long time ago from the stress!”

“Are you talking thinking that you’re funny?”

“Why is there even a need for me to say anything funny in a hilarious situation like this!”

Let’s ignore him. Deciding that, Sorata sat in front of the showerhead and pumped out some shampoo. And he started to wash his hair.

“Hey Sorata.”

“…”

“Hey son.”

“…”

“How do you want me to address you?”

“That’s not the point! What do you want?”

“Which girl do you like?”

At the unexpected question, Sorata choked badly. Some shampoo entered his eyes and they stang.

“Why are you asking a question like we’re on a school trip!”

Without caring about Sorata’s reaction, his father continued talking.

“You mother seems to like that pony tail girl… Aoyama was it?”

“Stop! Stop right now!”

“I think it doesn’t really matter if a girl likes you.”

“I told you to stop!”

“But I’m against polygamy.”

“Do you want me to migrate to a country that allows it and be naturalised there?”

“Well, that’s good as well.”

“Good?! Then don’t even mention it!”

“So, have you decided on your career path?”

“…”

“Well?”

It seems like this was what his father really wanted to talk about.

"…. Entering the Suimei University of Fine Arts via the escalator system[8] might be difficult with my current grades, but my 1st preference is Suimei."

Sorata replied straight away, as he had decided before.

"What will you do if the escalator system fails you?"

"Then I'll sit the normal entrance exams for Suimei Media department."

"If you fail?"

"… I still want to go there."

If he fails once, he would have to come back here at least once. Things would probably turn out that way.

"…"

His father didn't say anything.

"Can't I?"

Handling the educational fees and the living fees would put a strain on them.

"Well, if not, I'll try to make the ends meet on my end by doing some part time jobs. I think I'll have to work anyway."

Watching Nanami made him realise how reliant he has been on his parents. Nanami said that she was running low on living fees because she wasn't able to work this winter holidays. Sorata didn't know how hard that must be for her. But even so, he had things he

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escalator_school

wanted to do. He had things he wanted to try. He was ready to overcome hurdles for that goal.

“If you decided on that so far, then there’s no problem. Do whatever you think is right. Working part time is good. But don’t worry about your educational fees. I can make your… no, you and Yuuko’s at least.”

“… What? Father?”

“I won’t repeat myself.”

Either way, it seemed like his father was already thinking about Yuuko properly. Sorata honestly felt that that part about his father was respectable.

“Well, being accepted into Suimei High might be too much for Yuuko.”

“I think so too.”

Without answering back to what Sorata just said,

“Sorata.”

He called him out with a dumbfounded expression.

“What is it?”

“I’m dizzy and I can’t move. Help me.”

“Apologise to my innocent heart that thought of you as cool just now! Helping you can come after that.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have drunk before coming in.”

“Don’t come into the bath after drinking!”

“Don’t be silly. There isn’t a single father in the world who’s able to talk to his son while sober!”

“Don’t say pathetic things while trying to show off!”

Afterwards, Sorata was afflicted with physical and mental damage by dragging his father from the bathroom.

He will never forget that experience. No, it was chiseled into his brain, so forgetting it was impossible.

“Sorata.”

“What, you’ve still got something to say?”

“Happy New Year.”

“I’m not in the mood to be happy!”

And that was how his New Year started.

6th of January. Cold winds has become stronger since last night, so the temperature didn’t show any signs of rising even after the sun came up. He could see his own breath and he hugged himself from the cold. Maybe he felt worse because of where he was going for the Hatsumōde[9].

Sorata’s group was going to leave Fukuoka that afternoon. They also bought the tickets for the bullet train. But before that, they were doing their Hatsumōde that morning.

[9] First Shinto shrine visit of the Japanese New Year.

After getting off at the Dazaifu station, Sorata's group came out from the station and slowly walked with the line of people who were present for the Hatsumōde.

There still were a lot of people who were here even though the New Years Day had passed, so a moment of inattention would result in being lost. Usually, it would only take 10 minutes to reach the shrine, but not being able to walk as they wanted to resulted in being still stuck after 20 minutes of waiting in line. The torii[10] finally came into sight. If things were this bad on the 6th, then it would've been impossible to walk forwards on the first of January. Thinking about Mashiro and Yuuko being together gave him some relief that he postponed the Hatsumōde to today.

But nevertheless, it was still hard to walk. Well, it wasn't only because of the crowd that Sorata wasn't able to walk straight….

"Hey, Shiina?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you move a bit away from me?"

Mashiro was clinging on to his right arm ever since they arrived back at the station.

"I'll consider it if Yuuko gets off."

This time, Sorata looked towards his left arm. The one who was clinging onto him like a monkey doll was Yuuko.

"So she says, Yuuko."

"I'll consider it if Mashiro gets off."

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[10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torii

“So she says, Shiina.”

“Will Sorata be fine even if I disappear?”

If Mashiro was to get lost in the buzzing crowd, then it would spell the end for him.

“Alright. Don’t you dare let go of me.”

“Yuuko as well! Say that to Yuuko as well!”

“I’m just saying that I’ll be in trouble if you become lost!”

The same reason applied for Mashiro on his right and Yuuko on his left.

“Then me too. There!”

With the yell, he felt something soft on his back. It was Misaki. There was still a long way to go for her to become cheerful again, but she was recovering ever since the New Year. She reaped an overwhelming victory against Yuuko yesterday for eating a lot of rice cakes.

Misaki’s breaths tickled his neck as they came in contact with him. Nice fragrance came from her hair as it brushed the tip of his nose.

“G-Get off me, senpai!”

His voice was obviously squeaky.

“Ah~, Misaki is being unfair. Yuuko wants a piggy back as well!”

“Aren’t you the popular one, Kanda.”

Nanami seemed to be in a bad mood as she looked out into the distance.

“Why are you upset?”

“Because I am.”

Well I suppose so.

“Do you have a grudge against other peoples’ happiness?”

“So you really are happy. I see. I suppose a lot of happy things will happen to you if you stick to Kamiigusa-senpai like that. In many ways. It’s so creepy.”

Nanami’s eyes were chilly as she said that poker faced.

“No, wait, you’re wrong! That was my mistake! My situation is a pitiful one no matter how you look at it!”

“I don’t know.”

Nanami quickly turned her head away.

“Nanami, Kohai-kun is still open at the front. Go hug him.”

“….”

“Aoyama, what are you thinking.”

“I-It’s not like I’m thinking about that!”

“You better not, because otherwise, I doubt I’ll be able to return back to Sakurasou still sane after the Hatsumōde!”

Sorata’s group finally flowed out from the Hatsumōde line and arrived at the shrine somehow. He’s been thinking about it ever since he started to walk up the path, but there really were a lot of

people close to his age. As expected from the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine[11]. It was a trustworthy ally for preparing students.

Lining up in a straight line, the five of them done their Hatsumōde.

Yuuko was praying with all her might next to him. He knew without listening that she was wishing to be admitted into Suimei High.

Sorata didn't really want to pray for the impossible to a god, but he still wished for Yuuko's admittance after saying "I know this is a ridiculous wish, but…" at the start.

As well as

—Please let Aoyama's audition go well

He wished for it clearly. And he wished for just one more

—Please let Misaki-senpai become cheerful once more

After wishing so, Sorata's group moved towards to a shop next to the shrine to make way for other visitors.

There, Sorata realised he forgot to wish for something quite important.

"Oh no."

"What's the matter?"

Nanami asked suspiciously.

"I forgot to pray for the presentation."

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[11] A Shinto shrine built over the grave of Sugawara no Michizane the revered god of learning in the modern age. A lot of students who are preparing for entrance exams visits here.

“That’s alright.”

The one who answered was Mashiro.

“What is?”

“Because I wished for it.”

“R-Really?”

That was a surprise.

“Yeah.”

It was something that Mashiro done. Even when she probably didn’t wish for her own serialised manga to perform well. If Sorata had to ask why, she would probably answer that she would be fine doing it herself.

“I also prayed for Kanda.”

Nanami spoke with a small voice.

“Thanks, both of you.”

This type of thing was embarrassing but he was honestly happy.

“Uu… Yuuko also prayed for brother. Now was a great chance to build up the points for brother…”

“I don’t need you to pray for something negative like that.”

“Shock! Brother’s points are down…”

“I also prayed for Yuuko’s entrance exams.”

“Really?! Thank you, Nanami. Then what about brother? Did you wish for me as well?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for it though.”

"Why?!"

Well, because it was obviously a useless wish.

"If Ryuunosuke was here, he would definitely say that it would be more realistic to go memorise some more English words rather than spending time praying to be admitted… or something like that."

The thought of his next door neighbour in Sakurasou sprang to his mind. Ryuunosuke didn't fit in well in areas like these for a different reason to Mashiro.

"He totally would."

Nanami made an exaggerated expression.

Now then, what should we do? As he thought about it, Yuuko tugged his arm.

"Hey brother, I want to do this."

Yuuko ran towards the rows of ema[12] next to the lot drawing stand.

"Should we fill one out while we're here?"

They purchased a total of five emas for each person.

"Will you be filling them out here?"

"Yes."

"Then there are some pens prepared over in that area."

Following the shrine maiden's directions, Sorata handed the emas to everyone and moved to the directed place.

Grabbing the pen first, Yuuko wrote with giant letters,

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[12] Small wooden plaques where you write your wish on one.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_(Shinto)

—Get into Suimei High!

On it.

Next to her, Mashiro was drawing a picture of Yuuko on the ema. Did she even know what an ema was for? No, she didn't seem to know. It was too late to explain it to her now, so Sorata wordlessly let her be. The completed illustration of Yuuko's face was outstanding as expected from Mashiro. This was what she could do in an instant with a marker pen. It was scary rather than saying she was able to do this much.

Nanami, on the other hand,

—Please let me pass the auditions

Wrote so with neat handwriting.

Sorata wrote

—Please let Yuuko be admitted into Suimei High

Although he didn't learn it from Mashiro, he wanted to do something about the presentation with his strength alone. And he wanted to produce results for sure…. Sorata didn't pray for it, but fuelled himself with that urge.

Still holding the pen as the rest of them wrote down their wishes, Misaki also finished writing down her own.

"Brother, let's hang these up."

When they moved behind the main shrine, there were a lot of emas hanging on the stand.

"There sure are a lot."

Rows after rows of ema. Just how many were there? The scene was quite impressive. Looking at some of them, there was a large proportion of emas wishing for admission.

Praying for one self's admission. Praying for their child's admission. And there was even an ema belonging to a school teacher who wished for his whole class to be admitted. It was something out of a drama.

"Here, hang it next to Yuuko's, brother."

As he tried to hang his as a sibling pair just as Yuuko told him to, someone tugged his arm. It was Mashiro.

"Sorata's will be next to mine."

"Y-Yuuko asked first."

Looking straight at each other, Yuuko and Mashiro exchanged glares and sparks flew between them.

"Now, now, don't fight."

They hung the three emas in Mashiro, Sorata and Yuuko order, side by side. With that, the two of them shouldn't have complaints as they're both placed on Sorata's sides.

However, the two of them didn't seem like they were willing to accept it.

Not being able to put up with the two anymore, Sorata looked around for Nanami and Misaki.

Nanami decided to go for a slightly more distance place. She had her hands together with a serious expression.

Misaki on the other hand, was hanging up the ema quietly. What did she write? Had she been her usual self, she would've wrote something along the lines of

—Please let the world be peaceful

Curious, Sorata walked to Misaki's side.

And when he glanced at the ema,

—Please let Jin be admitted

He saw the cute handwriting overflowing with her emotions.

His heart hurt. No, it didn't hurt, it stang.

Misaki was wishing for Jin's happiness even in her sadness.

That earnestness tightened his heart.

Without a doubt, Misaki must've wished for Jin to be admitted when she done her Hatsumōde.

And not pray for herself…

"Jin will be accepted regardless of my prayer anyway."

It hurt his chest to watch Misaki smile like that. Because she was forcing herself to smile.

"I think I can understand how Jin-senpai feels."

"Kohai-kun?"

"Because Misaki-senpai is so amazing. I've thought about it while making Nyaboron during the culture festival; that I want to make something like that again."

"Then let's do it."

“But how should I put this, I would like to be of more help next time around. Just like Misaki-senpai or Shiina…”

“…”

“But I don’t have the skills to do that right now, so that’s why I’m immersing myself into different things. Experiencing a lot of things, trying them and learning… to be able to do things I wasn’t able to do next time.”

“I can’t wait anymore.”

Those were also Misaki’s truthful words. Each word inflicted pain on him. However, Sorata continued to talk even while being hurt facing each words head on.

“I also think so as well.”

“I just want to be by Jin’s side. That’s enough. Having our hearts together is more than enough. I would even give up on making animes if Jin doesn’t want me to.”

“Senpai!”

“What’s the matter? Kohai-kun?”

His clenched fist shook with rage. However, he desperately pushed that down.

“Don’t ever say that in front of Jin-senpai.”

It was Jin’s dream to create something amazing with Misaki. Misaki was Jin’s goal.

“It’s painful to put up with seeing someone abandoning something that one longs for.”

“…”

“Did you forget about Rita?”

Mashiro’s dear friend, who only hurt herself in the process of chasing after Mashiro…

“Ritan…”

Misaki closed her eyes in thought. When she raised her head, she wore a slightly bitter smile.

“Yeah. I see.”

“Yes.”

“Sorry Kohai-kun. I lied.”

“What?”

“To be honest, I can’t give up on animating. I end up making some. Because it’s fun.”

It was truly a simple reason. That simpleness was one of Misaki’s strong points and a definite talent. She knew what she liked. She knew where she gained her entertainment from. She knew what that meant to her. While that seemed simple it was surprisingly difficult.

“Even now… I want to go back to Sakurasou and make something. I’ve thought about Jin ever since the night on the Eve, but… all that’s in my head are thoughts about going for a large angle that captures the scene, or wanting to experiment with binaural recordings and things like that…”

“I’m sure Jin-senpai wants to do all those things properly with you. And not be swept away by the ordinary.”

“…”

Sorata didn’t know if his words were reaching Misaki. Misaki only looked at the ema that she wrote.

After standing like that for a while, Misaki opened her mouth.

“You know Kohai-kun?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think it’ll be OK to bring back an admission charm for Jin?”

“I’m sure he’ll be happy.”

To do so, the two of them needed to meet once more.

"… I'll do it. There is no one else for me but Jin."

Sorata thought that Misaki's reasoning was simple in wanting to animate. That's why she couldn't give up on that. It was impossible not to think about it.

After writing out the emas, Sorata's group moved back to the front of the shrine once more in accordance to Yuuko's wishes to draw lots. They drew their lots in Yuuko, Mashiro, Misaki, Nanami and Sorata order.

Mashiro and Misaki brilliantly drew 'Great blessing'.

"I've never drew anything else but 'Great blessing'. Maybe it's because there is nothing else inside?"

Misaki said something quite frightening.

"There are others in there!"

Sorata showed her his own 'Blessing' lot.

"That's amazing, Kohai-kun. That's a rare one."

"Don't be surprised like that!"

Furthermore, Nanami drew a 'Small Blessing' and said "Well, I guess it's normal," and accepted it half heartedly.

Yuuko, who drew first on the other hand, had her head bowed with a grim expression. It couldn't be helped. Because in a way, she drew the rarest of all lots: Curse. Glancing at the lot, there weren't anything bad written on it. There were some mundane advices about education, health and love relationships.

"It says studying persistently is important, Yuuko."

“I don’t want to hear something like that.”

“Then what were you expecting to hear?”

“Admission is a victory won, or something like that?”

“That’s already an impossible reality.”

“Boo~.”

Sorata lightly placed his head on top of Yuuko’s puffed out face.

“… Hey brother.”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for asking dad.”

“Not really…. I think he was already considering letting you regardless of what I said.”

“Yeah, but thank you anyway. I’m glad you’re my brother.”

“W-What’s that supposed to mean.”

Sorata scratched his cheek as he looked away. He felt embarrassed.

“Well, I guess I’m only saying the obvious. Now, let’s go tie these lots.”

“Ah, wait.”

After tying the lots, Sorata’s group visited a renowned teahouse for some Umegae-mocchi[13] before leaving Dazaifu.

“That was delicious. Let’s come back some time, Kohai-kun.”

“As long as it’s not in a one day trip.”

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[13] A speciality in that area.

There was a time when he was dragged to Osaka to have takoyaki and Sapporo to have ramen. It would be more appropriate to describe those schedules as a punishment rather than a trip.

Nanami must've been reminded of the time when she was dragged to Nagasaki for some champon, because she showed a tired expression.

From the teahouse to the station, Sorata's group had lunch with something called Acceptance Burger that Yuuko spotted. They were just some burgers with toasted bread and chicken cutlets and they tasted quite good.

Checking the time after finishing his lunch, Sorata noticed that it was time to start heading to the Hakata station.

Soothing Yuuko who wanted to play for longer, Sorata's group headed to the Hakata station to catch the bullet train. And with that, their home visit was coming to an end.

After riding on the subway for half an hour, they arrived at the Hakata station. They met up with Sorata's mother who brought their bags and Komachi.

She even loaded some specialities of the area as well. Pollock roes, beef intestines and vegetable stew set, crackers… Sorata's hands were filled with them.

"Thank you for letting us stay over the busy holidays."

Nanami politely thanked Sorata's mum.

"Thank you."

Mashiro also thanked her as well.

“Thanks.”

Misaki thanked her last.

“What are you saying. The holidays were so fun thanks to you guys. Come visit again anytime you want.”

“N-Never come back~.”

Yuuko quietly spoke to Mashiro while standing behind her mother.

“Ah, that’s right. Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“Your father wanted me to pass this on to you.”

“I don’t really want to hear it.”

“He said <Take responsibility as a man>.”

“What responsibility!”

“Also, <Yuuko will be heading there next month, so take care of her then>.”

“I was planning to in the first place. Also, are you planning to send Yuuko by herself?”

“Won’t that be OK since you’re there?”

He wasn’t able to say anything back to that.

“Well, I doubt anything will happen.”

But if she was going to sleep in Sakurasou, won’t that be an issue with her exam preparation? She might forget all that she learnt in a single night. He would have to consult Chihiro first. Well, it shouldn’t matter as he’s inviting a family member…

“And one more thing from your mum.”

Sorata’s mother signalled to him to come closer while appearing to be quite happy.

“What?”

“Lend me your ear.”

Without a choice, he leant closer to his mother.

“I prefer Nanami as a daughter in law.”

“W-What are you saying!”

“Oh, you don’t like her?”

“It’s not about whether or not I like her; Aoyama wouldn’t like it.”

“Then if Nanami doesn’t mind, what will you do, Sorata?”

“…”

“To me, Nanami seems to be a good girl helping around the house and she’s quite sensible, cute and kind.”

Well, his mum was right. It was easy to talk to her and he could relate to Nanami quite easily. He felt at ease as they could depend on each other while together. However, he knew that she had weak points that she worked hard to conceal.

“What do you think, Sorata?”

“That’s….”

A female classmate. But they weren’t just classmates. They were very close classmates and they also lived together in Sakurasou. She was working hard to become a voice actress, and he desperately

wanted her to succeed and he cheered her on. He didn't know how to describe someone who had that sort of relationship with him.

"That's all I wanted to say."

His mother lightly tapped his shoulder and sent Sorata away. When Sorata came to his senses, he was standing next to Nanami.

"What did she say?"

"N-Nothing."

After hearing all that weird stuff from his mum, he started to become aware of Nanami when he looked at her.

"Nothing really!"

"Kanda, you're weird."

"W-What's weird?"

"Sorata, strange."

Even Mashiro chimed in.

"I'm not!"

His mother was smiling brightly as she watched Sorata desperately denying himself.

"Look, it's almost time for the train."

He started to speak faster without realising it. It was really obvious that he was shaken.

Nanami bowed to Sorata's mother once more in thanks. Mum lightly waved her hand in reply and Yuuko stuck her tongue with a 'ble—hh' out at Mashiro.

Misaki lead the way and passed through the ticket validators. Nanami followed after her. After letting Mashiro go first, Sorata validated his own ticket.

Yuuko didn't finish talking, but he didn't want to block people off, so he just waved his hand.

"I guess the winter holidays are over with this."

There was a sense of nervousness in Nanami's face as she said that. She must've been thinking of the audition next month.

When Sorata walked on to the bullet train station, he turned over a new leaf in his heart.

Tomorrow was the 7th of January. It was the start of the third trimester. For Sorata, however, that day wasn't just the start of the third trimester. There was something very important to Sorata that was waiting for him after the first day.

Four o'clock in the afternoon. He had the <Let's Make a Game> presentation.

He already prepared all that he could. He practiced over and over again. All there was left was to pull of the presentation perfectly.

As he confirmed that in his heart, he realised his legs were shaking.

But he didn't think of himself as pathetic. He didn't feel anxious.

But silently,

—Is it you again?

He whispered to that newly growing feeling inside him.

The identity of that feeling was a tension that tightly wrapped around his body. It's been 4 months since their last meeting. He felt somewhat reminiscent about it. And Sorata was somewhat enjoying how that feeling changed his mentality.

Chapter 3

The Evil Spirit Known As Presentation

Today was the seventh of January. The new term has begun. After the assembly and homegroup, Sorata headed towards the arts classrooms to pick up Mashiro.

He walked along the stretched hallway as usual. However, his steps felt somewhat strange and unnatural. His expression was grim and his face lost all its colour.

He has been like this since the morning. His body felt like it was afloat and he was losing touch of his own body. It was like as if he lost half of his weight.

This wasn't just some nervousness that he felt in his head. Every fibre and drop of his blood feared the devilish thing by the name of presentation.

Thinking that he still had a day left, he was actually enjoying that nervousness until yesterday; reflecting on that, he was ashamed of his foolishness.

That suffocating pressure was noticeably different after yesterday night.

He looked bad enough to cause Nanami to worry as she left the class as she hurriedly rushed to her part time job, saying

"Kanda, you don't look so well."

Planning to half-laugh,

"I'm fine. I'm just a bit nervous."

But Sorata's expression must've been quite something to look at, because Nanami furrowed her brows pitifully.

Dragging his non-responding body, he somehow walked along the hallway.

"I'm fully prepared. All I have to do is to present it like I have practiced."

Although he knew that, the waves of nervousness seemed to grow higher and higher.

"I explained everything during my practices without a hitch."

So he can do it in the real thing. He had no other choice but to. This time, he will taste the success of giving a presentation for sure. To show prove to himself as a different person unlike the one who failed the previous presentation.

When he somehow reached the arts classrooms, there wasn't a single student left. Their homegroup seemed to have already finished.

"Mashiro's in the art room."

That voice came from the hallway. Without turning around to see who it was, Sorata knew that it was Chihiro.

"Don't tell me she's drawing from the first day back."

There should've been only assembly and homegroup today.

Next to Chihiro stood her ill-fated friend, Koharu Shiroyama—the modern Japanese teacher. They must've been returning to the teachers' lounge after the homegroup.

“There was a request from the university. They wanted some of Mashiro’s paintings… how many was it now? Anyway, they want to display them at some lobby.”

“Shiina sure is amazing~.”

Koharu commented about Shiina but it was hard to tell how honest she was being.

“Hm~mm.”

He wasn’t that surprised that such request came to Mashiro now. It was even more surprising that the world class prodigy painter Mashiro was now living an ordinary life in Sakurasou with other people while attending a Japanese high school.

“By the way, sensei, how was Australia?”

There wasn’t enough time to chat with his teacher yesterday, because he was too tired from the long trip back from Fukuoka.

“Did you bring back any souvenirs?”

“How were you raised up if you’re asking presents from your teacher?”

“If I think about it, I suppose I was raised up Sparta-style.”

He was starting to realise how strange his family really was as he grew older.

“My history aside, how was Australia?”

“Umm, what are you two talking about? Australia this, Australia that?”

Koharu asked while listening to their conversation. Didn't Chihiro tell Koharu, who was always by her side, about her trip to Australia during the winter holidays? That aside, Sorata was honestly surprised that Chihiro, being single, didn't travel with Koharu.

"Chihiro, you were in Japan throughout the entire winter holidays. We even went to the Hatsumōde together and prayed that we'll be able to meet a possible marriage partner this year."

"What?"

Koharu said something even more hard to comprehend.

"Koharu must've been dreaming."

"Why are you lying?"

"Sensei, what's going on?"

Chihiro must've realized that it would be impossible to keep this up for any longer, because she clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"There were some problems, so I didn't go."

"Eh?! What's was that?!"

Now he was really surprised.

"Then there was no need for me to bring all those girls back to my house?"

"So you efforts didn't pay off. You learnt a good lesson from that, right?"

"I see, I see what you're doing now sensei. Do you hate me? Do you really despise me? What I did I ever do to you?!"

"I don't really hate you or despise you."

“I can’t accept this! Tell me the reason clearly at least!”

“Chihiro, don’t tell me you haven’t told them yet.”

Koharu spoke without much thought. Sorata wondered what that was about, but he didn’t pay too much attention to it. However, he was concerned about the small stiffening change in Chihiro’s expression.

“I wonder what that something might be.”

“What’s the point of not telling him when it hasn’t been decided yet?”

Instead of replying to Sorata’s question, Chihiro spoke to Koharu. He could sense the annoyance in Chihiro’s tone.

“Sensei?”

“But it’s just a matter of time.”

Koharu replied nonchalantly. Being ignored by both them pushed Sorata out of the conversation.

“What are you saying?”

But he continued to ask.

“Something that doesn’t concern you at this point.”

“If it will concern me in the future, then please tell me now.”

He prepared himself for the truth.

“Hey Kanda.”

“Koharu, don’t you dare say anything unnecessary.”

When Chihiro threw daggers with her eyes, Koharu made a troubled expression which showed her helplessness.

“So she says, Kanda.”

“Kanda, you have you presentation today, don’t you? Concentrate solely on that.”

“All right.”

He felt that Chihiro wasn’t being her usual self. There were times when she kept on drinking and drinking and caused a ruckus in Sakurasou, but he has never seen her this sensitive before.

“Now, get going.”

He was still concerned, but Chihiro wasn’t going to tell him anything even if he kept asking about it. He could sense that from Chihiro.

And just like what Chihiro said, he had to concentrate on the presentation.

“Then I’ll be off now.”

“Kanda.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t try to be overly perfect.”

“What?”

He didn’t know what she was talking about because it really came out of the blue. However, after blinking his eyes a few times, he realised she was talking about the presentation.

However, he didn't really understand what that advice really meant.

"Ah, yes. I'll pull myself together and do my best."

"No. You didn't get me at all. I'm telling you not to do your best."

Spitting that out, Chihiro walked away while taking Koharu.

"Then tell me in a way that I can understand."

He mulled over what Chihiro said.

—Don't try to be overly perfect.

What did she mean?

—I'm telling you not to do your best.

He couldn't understand at all. Of course he had to do his best. He even sacrificed his New Years holiday at Fukuoka to prepare himself. To be prepared for it this time and pull off the perfect presentation.

"Well, maybe there're no deep meanings to them."

She was the world-class laziest teacher of Sakurasou. Choosing to ignore what she said, he headed to the art room.

He passed a group of people who appeared to be associated with the university in front of the art room. One of them was holding a large frame by his side, so that must've been the painting mentioned by Chihiro that was going to be displayed in some lobby.

When he peeked inside the room, Mashiro was there by herself.

Sitting on a chair in the corner, she was reading a manga intensely. It was a shoujo manga series that was a great hit two years ago and was adapted into a TV anime series. That scene wasn't particularly strange, but he could sense of incongruity.

Although she was still a rookie, Mashiro was a serialised mangaka who was drawing for a monthly magazine. There was nothing strange about reading a manga. There will be a lot of things that she could learn from other mangakas' works. However, to be honest, he has never seen her reading something this intensely.

But she started to read manga from this morning. She didn't lift her eyes off the manga on their way to school, so Sorata had to drag her all the way. If she was like that in the morning, and she was like this now, it was hard to imagine her continuously reading the manga during the assembly and homegroup.

The proof of that was in her hands—she was reading volume 1 in the morning, but she was now reading volume 7.

"Shiina, let's go."

"…"

"Hey, Shiina."

When he called her name once more, Mashiro stood up from her chair. However, she didn't look up from the manga as expected. Thinking that it couldn't be helped, Sorata grabbed the elbow bit of her uniform and exited the art room with Mashiro.

"How come you started to read mangas all of a sudden?"

"Study."

“Did Ayano tell you to read them?”

Did her editor contact her without Sorata knowing?

“Rita’s suggestion.”

“Huh?”

Now that he thought about it, she did indeed say something like “I’ll consult Rita” before.

“When you say studying, what are you studying?”

“Secret from Sorata.”

“You’re piquing my interest if you say that.”

“Hey, Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“Do you know something called Valentine’s?”

Sorata stopped his footsteps as he walked down the stairs at the unexpected question.

Mashiro, who was walking behind him, bumped into his back.

“So what was it about the day when I realise my true value?”

His reply was truly a sad one, but that was the only reply he could give as he didn’t have any memorable things about that day. Had it been Ryuunosuke, he would’ve said that it was the day when chocolate companies’ sales sky rocket around the nation, so he thought his answer was much better.

“If you know, then that’s fine.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be the only one who doesn’t know in the whole country.”

“…”

“So you’re not listening….”

There should be Valentine’s Day in England. Although, he did recall watching on TV that the day held different meanings depending on the country.

When Sorata reached the first floor, he noticed the back appearance of someone he knew quite well.

The one who was hiding in the shadows behind a hallway pillar was Misaki. She was looking towards the shoes racks.

“Misaki-senpai, what are you doing?”

When he talked to her, Misaki jumped in surprise and turned around.

“Oh, it’s only Kohai-kun~. You surprised me.”

“… So even senpai gets surprised.”

When her existence itself was a surprise….

“Who do you think I am, Kohai-kun?”

“An extraterrestrial being.”

“But in an alien’s view, Earthlings are the aliens.”

She finally admitted she was an alien.

“Sorata.”

At that moment, Mashiro spoke to him. She was looking straight beyond the pillar. It was the direction that Misaki had been looking at.

“What’s the matter?”

“Jin’s there.”

Understanding what was going on, Sorata also hid behind the shadow of pillar and peeked. Jin was there. However, he wasn’t alone. With him was the school council president… or rather, the former school council president. They were already in their shoes and they were chatting. No, it seemed like the former student council president was complaining.

“Go back, Mitaka.”

“Nah. I’ll also stay for Hauhau.”

An unexpected name was mentioned in their unusual conversation. Well, it was a nickname rather than a name though. <Hauhau> was Misaki’s friend who was in charge of Misaki’s animes. The 3rd year music student who created the dynamic BGM of <Galactic Cat Nyaboron> during the culture festival. Sorata has never met her in person though.

“Both of you hide!”

Misaki grabbed the back of his collar. As soon as she did, there was a voice coming from further inside the hallway.

“It’s been bothering me for a while, but who’s there?”

The former school council president turned his attention to the pillar that the three of them were hiding behind.

“Croak—. Croak—.”

Misaki suddenly started to mimic an unusual cry to somehow fool them.

“Why are you mimicking a cane toad’s cy in a situation like this!”

Sorata quietly shouted. In a situation like this, a cat or a mouse’s cry would’ve been more appropriate. Not that he saw either in school…. But there probably was a greater chance of them being here rather than a cane toad.

“Because I’m confident in my cane toad mimicking skills.”

“Throw away that sort of confidence in the sewers!”

In this situation, there was no other choice but for someone to step out. Misaki didn’t seem like she wanted to step out, and Mashiro didn’t have the skills to improvise. There was only a single choice left. Breathing in slightly, Sorata revealed himself to Jin and the former school council president; pretending that he was returning to the dorm with Mashiro.

“Ah, senpai.”

The unnatural acting made Jin wear a bitter smile on his face. He must’ve already noticed that it was Sorata’s group behind the shadow of the pillar. Having lived with them for such a long time, Jin should be able to recognise them by their voices.

“So you two are going back closely?”

At his words, Sorata looked at Mashiro’s face.

“We’re not really going back closely.”

“We’re going back closely.”

Sorata and Shiina both said different things at the same time. And he looked at her face again.

“Stop getting side tracked and go back. You have your presentation soon, don’t you? Can you really afford to be lazing around like this?”

“That’s true… but I will pay attention to things I need to.”

Sorata chose his words to give an underlying tone. He was hinting to Jin that he should think about Misaki.

However, that wasn’t going to bring Jin down.

“Aren’t you reliable. I expected you to be a lot stiffer.”

“I feel my body is indeed paralysed just like your expectations.”

“It’s quite commendable that you’re not showing that nervousness.”

“Jin-senpai, aren’t you planning on returning to Sakurasou?”

He eyed the former student council president out of the corner of his eyes. They ended up making eye contact. When Sorata nodded his head in reflex, the former student council president made a troubled expression. He must’ve been reminded of what happened at the culture festival.

“Well, I’m thinking of leeching off the student council president… no, the former student council president’s house until the end of entrance exams.”

“Hey, don’t decide that on your own. Did you say that you’ll stay only during the winter holidays!”

“Ah, then I’ll ask of you now, so please take care of me.”

“Please take care of me, my ass!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll sensibly leave the house when you call Hauhau over.”

“W-Who needs to worry about that! Moreover, Saori and I are…”

Going by the flow of the conversation, Saori seemed to be Hauhau’s real name.

“So you haven’t held hands with her yet?”

“T-That’s….”

When Sorata’s eyes met with the former council president’s, he glared at him intensely. Sorata really wished that he wouldn’t take out his anger from Jin on him....

“Judging by that reaction, it seems like you two held hands at least.”

“T-There’s no need for me to report every single thing to you.”

“I see, so you’ve at least kissed.”

“… Ughh?!”

The former student council president was furiously blushing up to his ears when he turned his head around. It seemed like Jin was spot on.

“Sorry, Soichiro. I kept you waiting.”

At that moment, a female student skipped towards them. She wore a pair of large headphones on top of her swaying short hair. Her limbs were long and she was tall for a girl. Sorata honestly thought she was a beautiful girl because of her large eyes and distinct face.

“What, Mitaka’s also here.”

The girl spoke in annoyance as soon as she saw Jin.

“So it seems like Hauhau doesn’t like anyone else but Soichiro.”

“Isn’t that obvious? He is my boyfriend.”

“So she says, Soichiro.”

“Don’t call me that, Mitaka.”

“So he says, Hauhau.”

“I didn’t say that to Saori. I said it to you, you! Why do you always make fun of me when you know that?”

“I think he was definitely doing it to see you get worked up like that.”

Sorata ended up joining the conversation without realising. Going by the flow, it was clear that the beauty before his eyes was Hauhau. At the same time, Sorata learnt that the former student council president’s name was Soichiro Tatebayashi.

Then, Hauhau noticed Sorata and looked at him.

“Ah, I’m…”

“Sorata Kanda, and over here is Mashiro Shiina, right?”

While it wasn’t a surprise that she knew of the painting prodigy Mashiro, Sorata didn’t expect her to know who he was.

“I heard a lot about you from Misaki.”

He wondered what those ‘a lot of things’ entitled to.

“Ah, my name is Sorata Kanda. Nice to meet you…. Hauhau-senpai?”

“It’s Saori Himemiya. Call me Himemiya-senpai from now on.”

As she was wearing a stern expression, he could feel the strong force from her which warned him not to talk back. He felt that he shouldn’t ask her about how the nick name <Hauhau> originated.

“Eh, ah, yes. Himemiya-senpai.”

“It seems like you don’t like that Hauhau nickname.”

“And you and Misaki aren’t showing any signs of stopping no matter how many times I say it.”

“If you’ve given up on making Misaki stop it, then that means that you don’t really hate that nickname.”

“… T-That’s.”

While denying it, Saori trailed off.

“So, can we go now Saori?”

“Sorry, Soichiro. I have to discuss about the studying aboard plans with the teacher, so you should go home.”

“Then I’ll wait for you here.”

“It’s fine. It’s cold.”

“I want to walk back with you as much as I can until we graduate.”

The former student council president’s voice was soft as he looked away. That scene was quite new to Sorata, because he thought of him as a very composed person.

As Sorata watched, Jin told him “Hauhau will be studying aboard in Australia when she graduates.”

“… OK, I understand. I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“No, take your time to discuss it with the teacher. It’s important after all.”

“Thanks. Then I’ll be back.”

Saori jogged back after waving her hand slightly.

“How refreshing~.”

“If you continue to make fun of me, I won’t let you stay over my house.”

“I’m not really making fun of you.”

It didn’t look like that at all.

“Then what’s with your attitude?”

“I’m envy you.”

“….”

The former student council present closed his mouth to judge Jin’s seriousness.

“I used to think… that I also wanted to have a relationship like yours.”

Looking up at the far away sky displayed outside the doors, Jin squinted his eyes trying to resist the brightness. However, the sun wasn’t up. Because the grey sky stretched out as far as one’s eyes can see today.

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m not trying to make you laugh. I’m being honest.”

“I don’t mean that.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I’m saying that I’m angry at you for envying others while giving up on your own things.”

“How nice~. That straight-to-the-point aspect of the former student council president. Someone like me is still alive because there are people who tell me off.”

“Spouting off nonsense again.”

That was what the former student council president said, but Sorata thought that Jin was being honest. Even if Jin never told the whole truth, he gave off the feeling of hiding some of his true feelings in his words. It was no different now.

“Then I’ll get going first. I’ll make some food and wait for you.”

Waving his hand behind his back, Jin started to walk away by himself.

“Mitaka.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have a key.”

The former student council president threw the key in an arc towards Jin who was already outside the door. Catching that key with a hand, Jin smiled. Then he dug his hands deep into his pockets while muttering ‘cold, cold’ under his breath and faded away with the other students who were going out of the main gates.

Only Sorata, Mashiro and the former student council president remained.

“If you don’t have any more business, take the cane toad and go home.”

Saying that, the former student council president headed towards the vending machines near the stairs. It seemed like he was going to wait for Saori there.

When Sorata looked back at the pillar behind him, he saw a nervous Misaki poking her head out like a nervous animal. She held something in front of her chest with both of her hands like it was something precious. It was the successful entrance charm that she bought in Fukuoka. She bought it for Jin. However, they weren’t talking ever since that event on Christmas Eve.

“Let’s go back, senpai.”

“Yeah.”

Misaki squirmed out behind the shadows of the pillar.

They changed into their shoes and started to walk in a line, side by side.

“Hauhau-senpai… or rather Himemiya-senpai is quite beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

“And she’s dating the former student council president.”

“Yeah.”

“I was quite surprised. But what I was most surprised at was…”

Sorata looked towards the vending machines where the former student council president should be at. However, he was too far to be seen from where he was.

“He… actually noticed that you were mimicking a cane toad.”

That alone was enough to tell that he was no ordinary person.

His breathing was very shallow. Even though he was taking deep breaths, the suffocating feeling did not go away. Naturally, even after loosening his tie, the situation didn’t improve.

Walking through the subway ticket gateway, the suit-wearing Sorata climbed the stairs one step at a time, frantically trying to control his breathing.

No matter how slowly he walked, no matter how many times he tried to breathe deeply, it was all ineffective. Then again, this was to be expected, because he did not have any breathing difficulties at all. His oxygen levels were perfectly sufficient.

Reaching the top of the long flight of stairs, dragging his body up to ground level, Sorata forced himself to get ready as he raised his head.

After the school-opening ceremony, Sorata returned to Sakurasou and had an early lunch. After practicing for the final time, he proceeded to the meeting place.

The game company’s main headquarters greeted Sorata as he stepped back onto ground level. The last time such a situation occurred was four months ago.

It was when summer was about to end. Now that it was winter, Sorata wasn't sure whether it was the crowd's clothing, or a difference in the atmosphere, but the impression it gave off had changed.

Inconceivably, the building looked smaller than it did in his memories.

"It probably isn't because I grew, but rather my memories made it out to be bigger than it is, huh."

Sorata arched his neck as he looked at the building, laughing hollowly to himself. If he did not deliberately act out this one-man show like this, he would likely be utterly consumed by the nervous feeling in his stomach.

He glanced at the time displayed on his phone. 3.45 p.m. The meeting time was at four, so he was slightly early.

Just as he was thinking about looking for a place to while away five minutes, the phone in his hand started to vibrate.

He received a text.

Even though he tried to operate the keypad, his fingers weren't as agile as usual. Of course, it wasn't because of the cold.

Reassuring himself that everything was alright, Sorata opened the text.

It was Nanami.

"Even if this might pressure you further, I have to say this."

The words broke off here, but the text looked like it continued further. Sorata scrolled downwards line by line, and after pressing

the button about five times, the remainder of Nanami's message appeared.

"Good luck!"

That was all. Upon seeing this message, Sorata bit his lip. This was just the beginning, but his eyes already began to heat up.

It was exactly because they promised each other to work hard that those words alone made him so happy. It wasn't merely an irresponsible "good luck". It also implied "because I'll work hard as well", giving him the courage to carry on and work hard together.

The short encouragement from Nanami gently moved an important part of Sorata's heart.

Even if only slightly, his fears were alleviated.

Using his still somewhat-disobedient fingers, Sorata texted a reply.

"Piece of cake!"

He firmly typed his message out.

"I can only say such a thing in messages though."

After leaving a few lines blank, he appended the second line before sending it out.

The phone display showed a picture of a letter sprouting wings, flapping them as it flew into a mailbox.

Without waiting for a reply, Sorata headed for the main entrance of the building. Since it was Nanami, she wouldn't reply so inconsiderately. As for that first text – she probably worried about it for a while, considering time and again whether to send it or not,

but because she wanted to say it, eventually decided to send the text to Sorata. It was definitely something Nanami would do.

Acquiring the courage to carry on, Sorata walked through the entrance of the building. He even had the composure to acknowledge the security guard who greeted him by nodding his head slightly.

Hanging his jacket on his arm, he stood at the information counter. Three receptionists greeted Sorata.

"I'm in your care[14], my name is Kanda Sorata. I'm here today to present my designs for [Let's Make a Game]."

Even though he spoke a little fast, he did not mess up a single word. Just that alone was enough to make him relax a little. The objective today was to complete his presentation without a single mistake. He could not overlook even a simple greeting.

"Oh no no, we're always in your care. The person in charge is coming over to receive you now, so could you please take a seat while you wait?"

The receptionist pointed to the chairs behind Sorata. After writing down his name in the visitor registry, he hung the entry pass around his neck.

In accordance with the receptionist's instructions, he sat down on the chairs behind him and waited.

The main reception area was tall and wide, giving a sense of freedom. Upon looking up, one could feel one's field of vision

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[14] The original in Japanese is probably お世話にあります, which roughly translates in English to something like "I'm in your care."

broadening. It was really beautiful. However, he did not realize this the previous time he came here. As a result of his exceedingly nervous state of mind, he couldn't see what he should have seen.

Even as he tried to recall it now, many parts of his memory were still fuzzy.

After waiting for approximately three minutes, a familiar female employee called out to Sorata. It was the same person who welcomed him previously.

"You must be Kanda-san?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to trouble you today."

"Oh, no, it's no trouble at all. Well then, allow me to bring you to the location."

After using the entry pass to walk through what looked like a ticket-checking gateway, he took the elevator straight to the twenty-fifth floor.

Up until now, it was all the same as the previous occasion, so there was nothing to be particularly surprised about.

Setting foot on the twenty-fifth floor, he was brought to Meeting Room 7. This was the room where those preparing to present would wait.

However, when Sorata entered the room, there was not a single person in there.

"Could you please wait here temporarily?"

"Of course."

Sorata slowly exhaled bit by bit, sitting on the chair closest to the door. He quietly closed his eyes, repeatedly going over the beginning of his presentation in his mind.

He had already gone to the washroom at the station, so there was no problem there.

Just from feeling alone, there was no way of knowing how many minutes had passed.

The door to the meeting room opened from the outside as a male employee stuck his head in. Sorata guessed that it was probably his turn.

"Kanda-san, even though you just arrived, I have to trouble you to begin your presentation now. Are you ready?"

If he could actually reply "please wait a while" after being asked such a question, then things wouldn't be this difficult.

"Yes."

Sorata tersely replied as he stood up.

The female employee watched Sorata as he left, sticking closely behind the male employee so as to avoid losing his way in the maze of meeting rooms.

He exhaled lightly as he focused his attention, sharpening his mental acuities. It was about to begin.

It's going to be fine. I've practiced many times, it's already very fluent. I can do it this time, I must do it. Concentrate, concentrate.

"This way please."

The male employee led him through the entrance of the presentation room.

This room was different from the previous occasion. Sorata noticed this as he greeted the judges who were sitting in a line with a "Please advise me." He walked behind the notebook computer set up next to the screen.

The moment he lifted his head, he suddenly lost all composure. Such a small room. The judges felt like they were right in front of him, even their expressions could be seen clearly. He wasn't certain as to whether the panel comprised the same people as the previous time. Although he recognized the vice-president sitting in the middle, as well as the game developer Fujisawa Kazuki who was again sitting at the far right, the remaining three people were indistinguishable from any other adult.

At this distance, even the smallest reaction from the judges could be seen.

Due to this unexpected state of affairs, Sorata had an ominous feeling, anxiously swallowing his saliva.

His field of vision became increasingly narrow, and his brain started to blank out. The situation caused Sorata to grow anxious, and his mind to become more and more chaotic.

I need to say something and take the opportunity to get a grip.

"My name is Kanda Sorata. I'm under your guidance today."

His voice had cracked to the point of being unable to fudge it over. He hoped that the judges would at least make fun of him for it, but they were as stoic as ever.

Sorata completely lost the nerve to look forward as he hurriedly bowed in apology. Then, his forehead struck the microphone.

"Kkaa!" The deep noise reverberated throughout the silent room.

Probably because he could not hold it in any longer, one of the judges gently chuckled. It was Fujisawa Kazuki.

"Fujisawa."

The vice-president admonished him calmly.

"Sorry about that, it was my first time actually seeing a person hit a microphone with his head. To think that such people truly exist – I've witnessed something valuable today."

Kazuki was convulsing with laughter, but the vice-president silenced him with a mere glance.

Sorata was so embarrassed he thought his face was on fire. His cheeks were boiling hot, and his ears were probably flushed.

After all that difficulty attaining this chance to erase his previous mistake, he had already made such a mess of it in the very beginning, much less aiming to do a perfect job. He hadn't even begun explaining his presentation content…

Like this, I'm already unable to attain a full score for self-evaluation…

No, I can't get discouraged here.

Sorata raised his eyes, and unexpectedly, his field of vision was clearer than before.

The blank, white fog in his mind gradually dissipated.

-Don't think about doing things perfectly.

He suddenly recalled Chihiro's words.

It probably wasn't referring to this though. Cleanly, elegantly, and perfectly – that was the aim, to not commit any mistakes. However, such aims were transformed into pressure, and as a result incurred errors.

On the contrary, making a few blunders, but thinking "well, this can't be helped" and disregarding them, won't disrupt the pace, allowing one to calmly aim for one's goals.

Perhaps it was because of such a reason that Chihiro would mention such a thing.

"Is there a problem?"

A bespectacled man of about forty years of age who was sitting next to the vice-president called out. He was probably worried about Sorata being too immersed in his own thoughts.

"Ahh, sorry. I'm fine."

This time, Sorata spoke normally, without his voice cracking.

Since it was already impossible to get a perfect score, this kind of reverse psychology might work.

Sorata spoke:

"Then, I will now start to explain the design plans for [Rhythm Battler]."

Sorata calmly reached for the mouse and clicked it. Although his fingers were still unruly, he still felt that it was a good thing he could move them at all.

The proposal was displayed on the screen, proceeding from the cover to the first page. It displayed the outline of the entire plan.

“Firstly, I will introduce the outline of my proposal.”

No problem, my voice came out fine. Although somewhat shaky, it’s still within expectations.

“The genre is a rhythm action fighter. As for what it is exactly, to put it simply… is to press the buttons in time with the music’s rhythm, so that the character you are controlling will attack the enemy. The aim of the game is to defeat the enemy before the end of a song.”

Sorata kept on looking at the computer screen as he continued to explain.

“The key feature of this proposal is the harmonization of the visual and auditory elements. If you replay the footage of a completed song, it gives the feeling of having created an awesome promotional video.”

He then flipped to the next page.

“The game is aimed at a core target audience of high school to university students, but due to its simple controls, I think that everybody can play it, regardless of age or gender.”

Sorata, now slightly more composed and cool-headed, turned to look at the projection screen.

“However, I feel that it should still target high school to university students, because this age group should be interested in its main feature of the [harmonization of visual and auditory elements].”

He used a laser pointer to emphasize the relevant paragraph regarding video sharing sites.

"In recent years, because of the widespread demand for smartphones, mobile terminals, portable music players and similar devices, people can enjoy videos and music no matter where they are. To the younger generations, myself included, browsing video sharing websites has already become a part of their daily life."

This factor was suggested by Maid-chan, run through Nanami, and only added on after considering it himself.

As to whether it was a correct answer or not would have to wait until the end of the presentation.

"You are able to view the videos as and when you like, users can leave their comments, anyone can easily upload content, these are all distinguishing features. Particularly since anybody can become a content provider, and players can communicate and discuss via comments, I think this will be an important factor in drawing the attention of people. I personally feel that this feature meshes very well with the proposal, because it becomes a means of expressing one's self by uploading footage of playing the game. Furthermore, if the visuals and music are both great, it will attract even more comments, achieving even more hits, even catching the attention of people who do not know about the game… that is, achieving a high visibility rate."

At this point, Sorata paused for a short while.

Then –

“I think, considering the current state of society, this game has the potential to achieve a wide user base, which is why I made such a proposal.”

If their eyes met he would panic, so Sorata unfocusedly looked towards the five-man panel. He received no reaction whatsoever, all of them displaying straight faces.

“In light of the above, please allow me to further explain the details of the proposal.”

There was no point in thinking of such matters now. He could reflect and review after this ended. Up until now he was able to speak without a hitch, which was probably the result of countless rehearsals. If he merely went through it mentally, there was definitely no way he could speak like this now. So, trust in your experience, and believe in your hard work.

He proceeded to the next page. At first glance, what appeared on the screen was what looked like a screenshot of a standard fighting game. “As I said in the beginning, the player’s objective is to defeat the enemy by following the rhythm. However, the method of defeating the enemy depends entirely on the player. When following the rhythm, the player has to decide which buttons to press. For example, pressing the O button will attack with a [sword]. Pressing the X button will use [magic]. The △ button activates a [kick], while the □ button will initiate a [body strike] to hit the opponent.

“That is, you can use the O button the defeat the enemy entirely with the [sword], or you can use all four buttons, first using the [sword] to slash, followed by a [kick] to launch the enemy into the

air, and follow up with [magic] to pursue and attack the airborne enemy, taking advantage of the moment he lands to attack with a [body strike]… Players can freely determine their own combos. Such combos are the main delight of this proposal, coordinating with the music while enjoying one's own [awesome attacking style] to [appeal to people]."

With Mashiro's drawings explaining the combo mechanic, it should be possible to understand the content at a glance.

"Like this, by ensuring repeated attacks, the damage dealt to the enemy will also increase."

The proposal emphasized "Ensuring combos can deal massive damage" in bolded font.

"Apart from that, by pressing the buttons in a certain order while dealing attacks rhythmically, [Special Moves] can be activated. For example, if the buttons OOOX△ are pressed to activate the special move, the character will attack thrice with the [sword], use [magic], then [kick] the enemy into the air, following which an amazing [Special Move] will be activated."

The words "Decide your special moves!" appeared in the middle of the page, while to the side was a picture of the game protagonist striking an airborne enemy with a giant sword.

"Apart from special moves, there are the more powerful [Super Special Moves], which are also activated via specific button orders. As these are more spectacular than the usual special moves, regardless of whether the rhythm is followed, the character will

automatically perform a combo. However, the rhythm is still important, since it will affect the final amount of damage the super special move will deal. Of course, with more successful hits, the final amount of damage will increase."

Explaining it all in a single breath, Sorata paused to take a slight breather.

"In addition, if the player fails to follow the rhythm, he will get attacked by the enemy, reducing the health of the character. If he fails too many times and loses all his health, it's game over. While relatively trivial, that is all for the main content of the game. Now, let me move on to explain the other factors."

The next page was concerned with the topic of the game character.

"The playable character's looks and equipment can be customized according to the player's preferences. There are also various weapons, such as [swords] and [guns], allowing players to experience different styles of battle."

He continued to explain the various factors.

"Apart from that, we've also considered allowing multiple players to collaborate in a co-op mode. This is to allow for the completion of difficult songs via division of labour, while at the same time letting friends laugh and enjoy the game together." Sorata swallowed the saliva which had gathered in his throat.

At this point, there wasn't much left to explain.

"The game is set within a virtual Internet world, where programming errors and viruses are enemy monsters. In order to

restrain their propogation and suppress their numbers, the player operates the game's character to do battle."

The big screen displayed a concept art which perfectly communicated the setting of the game. Clearly because it was drawn by Mashiro, only at this time did the five judges look up together.

As expected of Mashiro's drawings. In today's presentation, this was the exact moment where he could appeal to the judges. Sorata had enough composure to secretly feel happy about it.

"Finally, please allow me to give an overall summary of the proposal's core concepts."

This was also the final page of the proposal.

"[Combining awesome music with the joy of coolly defeating the enemy] is the theme of the proposal. Other than that, it can use this to allow the player to directly experience [fun], while at the same time generating the desire to [show off to other people], directly creating [interpersonal connections]. The aim is to create a game where [playing is fun], and [merely watching is also fun]."

Sorata looked away from the projection screen and faced the panel of judges.

"That concludes my presentation for [Rhythm Battler]. Thank you for your attention."

He silently bowed his head in thanks, spending a moment to take a deep breath.

He did what he was supposed to do. Even though he made a few laughable mistakes in the beginning as a result of an indescribable

nervousness, but it was also because of that that he could relax, unlike the previous time where his mind went blank halfway through the presentation.

His self-evaluation wasn't bad at all. No, even though it didn't go as perfectly as he would have liked, he thought that this still counted as a job well done.

The him now probably could not do any better than that.

If there were any inadequacies, he would have to improve his capabilities from an even more fundamental level.

Sorata looked forward, preparing to answer any questions.

"…"

The vice-president sitting in the middle was the first to enter his field of vision. His eyes were tightly shut, arms crossed over his chest, not moving an inch. The other judges, including Fujisawa, were apparently waiting for the vice-president to speak first.

Previously, the vice-president told him frankly that he didn't make the cut. Probably because of the trauma, Sorata could not maintain his line of sight.

His heartbeat accelerated to the point where his heart began to hurt. He could even hear the sound of his heart pounding. The silence was overbearing. If there were no questions, he hoped for the result to be quickly announced. However, to press the judges to announce the result would be too terrifying, an impossible task. Sorata's mouth began to dry.

Obviously unaware of Sorata's state of mind, the vice-president suddenly spoke:

“Fujisawa. If your side were to do it, how much would the development costs be?”

“Why would you ask this for no reason?”

Even though he sounded perplexed, Fujisawa’s cordial and gentle expression had barely changed.

“Answer me.”

“Although it’s just a rough estimate of the manufacturing costs, if my side was doing this, including debugging, it will probably take about a hundred million.”

He mentioned such a huge number with such a relaxed attitude.

“…”

Sorata’s jaw dropped.

In front of the astonished Sorata, the bespectacled man sitting next to the vice-president added:

“Let’s say it costs 500 yen per download, that would need about 200,000 downloads. It’s not realistic.”

At the same time, he passed a note to the vice-president.

“If you want stable profits, you could consider downloadable purchases, and recover the development costs from there. Although it’ll take a longer time, but the quality of the design, new songs, new weapons and new outfits should be enough to sell, especially new songs. However, there might be a need to change the core of the game as a result – that might be a disadvantage.”

The vice-president furrowed his brows upon listening to Kazuki’s suggestion.

“I would never have expected you to regard sales as a priority.”

“I’m merely suggesting a possibility, because Director Futago seemed to be a bit concerned.”

“If we made it externally?”

“It would probably cost ten million for a trial version and seventy million for a full version. However, regardless of who makes it, he won’t be very happy.”

Kazuki answered immediately, as if he were already prepared.

“A mere trial version costing ten million, what an extravagant era we live in.”

“Indeed. During my time, ten million was enough to cover total costs.”

There was probably some kind of implied meaning there.

“Fujisawa, just speak your mind.”

“No, it’s just that… I kind of miss the good times where we relied on the perseverance of the developers to solve funding problems. I’m also extremely grateful to Director Futago for allowing me to gain such experiences.”

“Could the two of you please end your discussion here?”

The bespectacled man wore an unpleasant expression as he interjected, while shooting a quick glance at Sorata. He probably thought it inappropriate to discuss such matters in front of outsiders.

“Then, what if we sold it as a package?”

“How would we handle the royalties concerning the music?”

The bespectacled man tried to verify, while the person who answered was Kazuki.

“If we allow game footage to be uploaded, the music would have to be composed especially for the game. This is to prevent any copyright issues, so we wouldn’t have to worry about settling any royalties. Another way of putting it would be that if we used songs which we did not own the rights to, the users’ uploads would be deemed illegal.”

The vice-president concurred.

“So, from the estimated turnover, a package should be suitably priced at 2,200 yen. We break even at about 45,000. If budgeting is going to approve this, we would need to aim for about 100,000.”

After listening to the bespectacled man, the vice-president stared at the ceiling, as if he were deep in thought.

Following which, his vision landed on Sorata’s proposal, and said:

“Not bad.”

It wasn’t exactly praise for the game design. Sorata quickly understood this point. The corners of the vice-president’s mouth turned up slightly, indicating his feelings about the situation at hand.

The largely-ignored Sorata was unable to do anything other than standing in a corner with a blank expression.

At this point, there was a knock at the door.

A glasses-wearing female employee entered the room. She apologetically informed the vice-president:

"Very sorry to interrupt your conversation, director, but your next appointment…"

She was probably his secretary.

"Understood."

He waved his hand to dismiss her, following which she retreated to the side of the door.

"If possible, shouldn't we tell him the results? He's been standing there quite nonplussed for a while now."

The person who mentioned this was Kazuki. Since he had already realized this, Sorata hoped that Kazuki could have at least helped out a bit earlier.

"Kanda-san, thank you very much for your presentation efforts today."

"Y-yes. Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to listen to me."

"I'm sorry to say, the conclusion is that there would be difficulties if our company were to fund your proposal."

"……yes."

It wasn't that simple after all. Even though the previous conversation held a glimmer of hope, but it would indeed cost quite a bit of capital…

“However, if Kanda-san doesn’t mind, could you revise the contents of your proposal, along with some assistance from members of our staff?”

“Eh?”

“That is to say, it qualifies in part.”

Kazuki explained to the astonished Sorata.

“Director, the time…”

The secretary interjected in embarrassment.

“Yes, I know. Fujisawa, I’m leaving the rest to you.”

“Leaving the rest to me?!”

The vice-president ignored Kazuki’s protests.

He swiftly stood up.

“Kanda-san, I’m sorry, but I have a busy schedule, so I have to leave early. The rest will be explained to you by my staff.”

“Ah, yes.”

After a short bow, the vice-president, three of the judges and the secretary left the meeting room one after another, leaving Fujisawa Kazuki.

“Really, Director Futago is such a troublesome person. I’m already this busy. I should probably leave the work for [Let’s Make a Game] to my subordinates.”

Kazuki complained in a relaxed tone.

“Well then, where should we start? I guess I need to confirm Kanda-kun’s intentions first. What do you think?”

“W-well, before that, I have a question.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“What do you mean by assisting? What do I need to do next?”

Sorata’s brain could not catch up with the unexpected developments.

“Ah, right, other people might not know what I know. Always been a bad habit of mine. Ehh ~ I’m sure Kanda-kun knows about the inflation of game development costs in recent years.”

“Yes.”

“This has also affected our decision-making for game proposals. To be frank with you, most of the entries were rejected because of budget constraints.”

He explained to Sorata in a serious manner. An unimaginable feeling.

“In my time a budget of approximately ten million was enough. As a result of that, I was very excited to make games with the ideas the participants provided.”

“So you can’t do that now.”

“Yes. Did you know that recently, even for mobile games, a well-made one can cost up to twenty million yen?”

“Th-that much?!”

Even though a hundred million was a huge sum, but twenty million was also plenty scary. Of course, spending ten million on a whim was also quite reckless…

“Times have changed. I don’t think we can rely on vigour and momentum to overcome budgetary problems like we did ten years ago.”

Kazuki smiled bitterly. He was probably reminiscing about those times.

“Furthermore, you can’t increase the sales of games just by increasing development costs.”

“Yes.”

“This is why most of the proposals presented would probably result in losses.”

“…”

“Of course, it is extremely important to evaluate whether a game is fun or not before selecting it. This is why it isn’t that important for proposals to follow a BP… business plan. From the perspective of an industry outsider, it is not possible for them to understand how much a project would cost. However, insiders can tell such things just by looking at the game.”

“I see.”

“This is why recently regarding future projects, we have been assisting with the figures. From a business point of view, after doing a quick cost-benefit analysis, we’ll pitch the proposal to the main decision-makers to decide whether or not to draft a budget… that is to say, to transform a conceptual proposal into a marketable product.”

“If it passes through…”

“Then work on a trial will start within two to three months. This is to test whether or not a realized version of the game will be as interesting as conceptualized.”

“Then, if it doesn’t make the cut…”

“The project might be terminated, or perhaps extended for another month for further testing.”

“……”

“There’s no need to get so serious about it now.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right.”

“Then, if the trial version attains approval, then work on the real thing can begin. Does this answer your questions?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Kazuki explained it extremely clearly.

“Ah, right. Since the proposal was done by Kanda-kun, if a budget is drafted, development will proceed according to Kanda-kun’s wishes, so you don’t need to worry about that. We can ask you to work with our own developers, be the bridge between you and external developers, or if you want to develop it with your own team, that’s also fine. You can also set up your own company.”

“My own company?!”

It was like an unreachable, unimaginable world.

“Even so, looking at the current plans, it would be impossible for two or three people to develop it, so I would expect some problems there.”

“Is that so?”

After all, he wasn’t that clear on this front. Talking about development, there was only the cultural festival’s [Galactic Cat Nyaboron]. That was rather intensive. Even so, the main reason it could even be completed was because of Mashiro, Misaki and Ryuunosuke…

“Besides the characters, weapons, and outfits, there are also monsters. If we don’t make it more efficient, the modeling department will be overworked. Also, the animation as well. Of course, I’m talking about if we include the current proposal wholesale without any changes…”

“I see.”

“Just mentioning it, but if the budget is approved, we might buy over the entire proposal.”

“……”

Sorata’s head shot up on reflex, eyes relentless fixed on Kazuki.

“You want to do it yourself after all. Don’t worry, we won’t steal it away.”

He was completely seen through.

“Well then, since you’ve listened up to now, what do you intend to do?”

To be able to discuss such a thing with frontline developers was an exceedingly attractive proposition. It bode well for the proposal, and personally, Sorata was also extremely interested. What kind of

discussions would occur… he had already started to look forward to it. There was clearly no reason to refuse.

“I’m relying on you.”

“I see. In that case, I obviously can’t escape from this. After all, it was Director Futago who assigned it to me.”

Kazuki rose from his seat, walked in front of Sorata and handed him a name card.

Sorata had received that name card before, even though at the time he was requested to pass it to Chihiro…

“These are my contact details. Ah, the company name is different from this one though, because I’m under a separate company.”

“I knew… no, I understand.”

The name card displayed the title of Director, but the company wasn’t particularly well-known. Kazuki's company did not directly sell games, but rather did so via the company Sorata was now standing in. This is why Kazuki’s company did not appear on any advertisements, but if you mentioned his company as a game developer, then many people would have heard of it.

A knocking at the door interrupted the conversation. It was the female employee who met Sorata at the reception counter.

“Are you still discussing something?”

Kazuki indicated that the discussion was over, telling the employee who was about to walk out of the room to stay.

“Send a mail to me once you get back. Once this side is ready, we’ll decide on a day to discuss matters.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. Also, that…”

“Yes?”

“Sorry.”

“Why are you suddenly apologizing?”

“I passed your name card to Chihiro-sensei, but she tore it to pieces and threw it into the trash bin.”

“……”

Kazuki was stunned for a moment, but then broke out into laughter.

“No problem at all. Didn’t I say that before? That was bound to happen.”

“What are the two of you talking about?”

The female employee standing at the door queried, probably confused by Kazuki and Sorata’s dialogue.

“Private matters.”

“How surprising. Even the workaholic Fujisawa-san has private matters.”

The female employee smiled mischievously. It was quite refreshing for Sorata, who had only ever seen her serious side.

“That’s going a bit far.”

Fujisawa apparently did not have any intention of rebutting her, as if acknowledging the truth in her words.

“Then, that’s all for today.”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

“You’ve said that already.”

Kazuki urged Sorata out of the meeting room, through the corridors, and entered the elevator along with the female employee.

“I’ll send you a mail once I get back.”

“Sure thing. See you soon.”

Kazuki waved goodbye to Sorata as Sorata bowed. Even as the doors closed, he maintained this posture.

Once the elevator reached the ground floor, Sorata returned the entry pass to the reception counter and left the building.

The sky had already gone completely black. However, it wasn’t particularly dark as a result of the surrounding street lamps.

His brain was completely white. However, it was a different from the feeling you get when you suddenly forget something. He was unable to think. He wasn’t unsettled – it was more of a peaceful blankness.

He took one step at a time, descending the flight of stairs towards the subway station. He passed the ticket gate and quickly got to the front of the platform.

The train arrived at the opposite platform. The surroundings became lively as a result of the crowd. An announcement was broadcast: “Please do not run into the carriage.”

The door shut, and the train started to move again, leaving the platform.

Only then, did Sorata finally realize the joy within his heart.

He tightly gripped his right hand and uncontrollably started to laugh secretly. A man wearing a suit walked over, so Sorata tried his best to control himself. However, the uncontrollable urge to jump for joy spread throughout his entire body. It was extremely difficult to restrain.

As though he could not hold it in anymore, he started to pace back and forth on the cramped platform. No matter how much he tried to control his strides, his feet were about to skip to a beat. His body was writhing with excitement.

In the end, he still laughed out loud.

-Right, I have to tell everyone!

Because I received everybody's help.

He took out his phone and selected Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki, Jin, and Ryuunosuke's addresses. However, even though he wanted to send a message, he could not think of what to write.

Furthermore, it was only a partial pass, things weren't going to end here.

"Aaaah, how troublesome!"

Sorata decided to just go with the flow, and typed:

-It was a huge success!

And then added:

-It was thanks to everybody's efforts! Thank you!

After pressing send, the train pulled into the station platform.

Who will reply first?

Sorata thought as he rushed onto the train.

After about an hour's journey on the very same train he had taken to his presentation venue, Sorata finally reached Suiko High. As he passed by the ticketing counters, he thought to himself: "It's good to be back."

He immediately headed towards Sakurasou after exiting the station.

Although many good things had just happened to him, his current expression wasn't very pleasant. Even though he was struggling to hold in his excitement and exhilaration just a while earlier...

He stared blankly down at the screen of his cellphone.

No one had replied to his texts at all.

Sorata was beginning to regret sending out those texts on the spur of the moment. However, he at least expected someone to reply.

On the other hand, if Mashiro were drawing manga at the time, she may not have noticed the phone ringing. Nanami as well, if she were currently at work, she wouldn't have time to be paying attention to her phone. As for Sorata, he figured he couldn't blame Misaki for not replying, considering her emotional state. Jin and Ryuunosuke, although they were both different in many aways, they were probably the same in that they wouldn't bother replying to Sorata's message anyway; and besides, the two of them would probably reply in a manner that would just tick Sorata off.

"Oh come on, everyone's ignoring me."

Since he had thought that everyone would be happy for him, he was somewhat disappointed, or rather regretful. Either way, he felt like he was going to throw a tantrum at any moment.

Sorata took about ten minutes to return to Sakurasou, grumbling all the while.

“Huh...”

He noticed that there was some construction work going on at the empty plot of land beside Sakurasou. Was a house going to be built there?

It’ll be a pain if I get ribbed for this, Sorata thought to himself.

Sakurasou was exactly the same as he had left it. Although he had achieved fairly good results during his presentation earlier, Sakurasou couldn’t possibly change because of it, it couldn’t possibly become more beautiful all of a sudden because of it.

“I guess it’s my own fault for being too excited...”

Wouldn’t it be great to have days like this once in a while - Sorata thought to himself while opening the front door of Sakurasou, albeit somewhat sadly.

He stepped through it, looking down as he did so.

In the very next instant, he heard a few voices crying out at once:

“Congratulations -!”

At the same time, he heard about fifty mini party poppers going off at once, and rolls and rolls of confetti fell about him.

Due to the shock, Sorata fell onto the ground, and at least half of his body was buried in the debris. As expected of the residents of Sakurasou, they didn't know where to stop.

"You all..."

He looked up at the three girls standing over him from his position on the ground: Misaki was in the middle, with Mashiro and Nanami on either side of him, and they were each holding large amounts of party poppers.

"I thought...my heart was going to stop."

"Murder case uncovered in Sakurasou! 'The culprit was the third ranked on the character popularity rankings!' something like that?"

Misaki smiled as she said that. I haven't seen that smile of hers in so long, Sorata thought to himself, and his spirits rose.

"Who's the third anyway?"

"Um...Nanami?"

"O-of course not! Didn't I say that we shouldn't have bought too much of these things!?"

If so, why was she holding the most poppers out of the three?

Nanami, having realized that Sorata was staring at her, quickly attempted to hide the poppers she was holding behind the back, after which she quickly threw them in the direction of the corridor, apparently in an attempt to eliminate any evidence of her involvement before stretching a hand out towards him to help him up. Sorata grabbed hold of it and stood up.

Just as he did so, another bang rang out. Behind Misaki...Akasaka Ryuunosuke stood with his back against the wall, appearing mildly bored.

"I might as well congratulate you."

"Right, thanks!"

Sorata did have Ryuunosuke to thank for teaching him the basics of making a proposal and how to prepare himself mentally for the event.

"Help me thank Maid too."

"Oh, regarding that, she told me to pass you this message,"

"Message?"

"She said 'If you want to thank me, just do that for me. Thanks in advance.'"

'That' was probably referring to her request for Sorata to go over to England and beat up a certain someone. Which was of course impossible for him, so he decided he would think of some other way to express his gratitude afterwards.

"That thing?"

Mashiro leaned over and asked.

"Some things in this world are better left unknown."

"To think that Kouhai-kun would have a personal, unrevealable promise to Maid, how perverted~"

"It's not what you think it is!"

If he could, Sorata wanted someone to discuss the matter with. Then again, who could he entrust with the information that he had literally been ordered to assassinate someone?

“Since Kouhai-kun’s back, let’s get on with the “Kouhai-kun Celebration Party!” I’ve already prepared some delicious and luxurious food, so just sit back and enjoy!”

Misaki said as she dashed into the kitchen.

Sorata surveyed his surroundings while removing his shoes. There was still one person that he had hoped to see here. Even Ryuunosuke had emerged from his room for his sake.

“I tried to get Mitaki-senpai to come but...in the end, he still...”

“I see.”

“He wanted me to tell you something though.”

“What is it?”

“Congratulations.”

“That’s...normal.”

Considering it was Mitaka Jin they were talking about, he would probably have said something sarcastic to embarrass Sorata insteadn...

“Could it be that Mitaka-senpai just isn’t in the mood?”

“His exams are coming up too.”

“I’m not referring to that...I’m talking about Misaki-senpai.”

“Ah...oh, is that so?”

“Hey! Kouhai-kun! If you don’t get over here right now, I’m gonna eat all this by myself!”

Misaki ran back once again, apparently having gotten tired of waiting for the rest of them.

“Right, I’ll go change my clothes and come back as fast as I can. Give me a minute.”

“Thirty seconds!”

“Roger that!”

After taking off his suit and tie in the safety of his own room, Sorata returned to the dining room. What waited for him there was a gigantic rice pot placed right in the middle of the round dining table.

He recognized the pot as the ones used in their school’s canteen area, which meant it was meant for business purposes, and one full pot could easily feed tens of people.

Also, what was inside it was not plain white rice, instead it was colored slightly reddish-brown, like that of red beans.

“I know it won’t do me any good asking, but I’m gonna ask anyway! What’s with the Sekihan[15]!?”

“Because it’s an occasion worth celebrating, of course!”

He felt like they were celebrating for the sake of something else instead, or was he just thinking too much?

“Kouhai-kun, we’ll let you do the honors!”

---

[15] TL note: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sekihan

Misaki said as she handed everyone each a spoon.

“Huh? That’s how we’re gonna do it?”

Despite what he said, he had no idea what “that” method was. Mashiro who was sitting down merely looked at her spoon contemplatively, and she appeared to be thinking of something. Nanami was stupefied, while Ryuunosuke was the only one who appeared to not have been majorly affected:

“It’s just like using a shovel to eat teppanyaki, I guess.”

Either way, Sorata felt happy that he was able to celebrate with everyone in this manner. He had at first thought that they had all ignored his messages, but it was actually so that they could surprise him like this afterward.

“Right, since I won’t get to do this often, I’ll dig in then!”

Sorata shoved his spoon into the reddish-brown grains of rice and scooped up a large amount of the steaming hot food, after which he promptly stuffed all of it into his mouth in one large gulp.

The sesame seeds sprinkled on top helped to neutralize the taste, and the salt added was just right, not too much nor too little, making the dish a delicious one. It felt especially so partly because of the way he was eating it.

After Sorata’s go, Misaki, Mashiro and Nanami tucked in respectively as well. Last but not least, Ryuunosuke silently joined in.

“I’m really glad to be enjoying this with all of you guys, but I still feel kinda conflicted.”

He did, after all, only make it halfway. As everyone's gazes fell on Sorata, he began explaining his current situation, notably that he would be carrying out discussions with the developers there and he would have to shrink his project. Another round awaited him as well where his project would be screened for its viability and marketability in the marketplace...

"So technically you didn't pass."

"Then, we'll just have to celebrate even more after you do!"

Misaki's usual personality was returning. It suited her well, as it should.

"Mm, what Kamiigusa-senpai said."

"Thanks, in order for us to be able to celebrate like this again, I'll be sure to work even harder."

He didn't know the format in which his discussions with the developers there would be carried out. Although he could vaguely visualize how it might be like, he knew for sure that it would definitely differ from an actual meeting. Ryuunosuke would probably know, but Sorata didn't really feel like asking him. He felt uneasiness from not knowing what lay ahead of him, but a part of Sorata relished in this feeling.

He couldn't wait for it, and despite that he was currently sitting down and enjoying food with everyone else, he wanted to dash out right then and there.

"Aoyama, thanks for your message."

"Oh...I didn't give you any trouble, did I?"

“I got it right as I was about to enter the building, it helped a lot.”

He smiled.

“I see? That’s great.”

Nanami smiled as well, appearing relieved.

“Message?”

The question came from Mashiro.

“Right before my presentation, Aoyama sent me a good-luck message.”

Mashiro looked over at Nanami.

“Did Sorata feel happy after getting the message?”

“Of course, I was very happy. It helped me too.”

“Then please wait for me.”

Mashiro stood up and walked out of the dining room. Her tiny footsteps could be heard heading up to the second floor.

“What does she want now?”

Sorata asked Nanami, since Mashiro herself wasn’t around.

“No idea.”

Nanami looked back at him, seemingly just as confused.

After a short while, Sorata’s phone buzzed - he had received a text message.

‘’’- Do your best.’’’

The message was sent by Mashiro.

Sorata didn't bother replying, and after a while she returned to the dining room.

"What kind of joke is this?"

"You said yourself that you would feel happy if you received a text message."

"If you want to do it now, you could've at least sent me "Congratulations!" or something! Or are you telling me to work even harder now? That feels even more depressing coming from you!"

"Your reaction's different from when Nanami sent you the message."

Mashiro's eyes narrowed unpleasantly.

"Of course not!"

"You're giving her special treatment?"

"No!"

"You're a sly one, treating Nanami like that."

"I'm pretty sure the sly one is you."

"Sorata only treats Nanami specially."

"I treat you specially every single bloody day, don't I?"

Mashiro still seemed unhappy despite having hard facts shoved in her face. To be precise, she seemed as if she was going to throw a tantrum.

"But, since you helped me with the concept art, thanks a lot."

"..."

“Because of you, I was able to explain the project so much easier.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, without you, my presentation wouldn’t have gone so well.”

“Then I’ll forgive you.”

“Thanks.”

“But...”

Mashiro stared at Nanami as she said this.

“Hmm, is there something on my face?”

Nanami looked back at Mashiro while eating.

“Nothing.”

“Shiina?”

“Let me think it over.”

He felt that Mashiro was getting more and more unreadable recently. No, he had never really been able to read or understand her before, but now it seemed as if the parts about her that he didn’t understand now had turned into something else. At least the old Mashiro would never say something like “I don’t understand myself”.

Maybe because she had thought of something, an incredulous look appeared on Nanami’s face.

Just then, they heard the sound of a door opening coming from what appeared to be the front door.

The first person to react was Misaki, as she had probably been longing for Jin to come home.

However, the person that appeared was not the one Misaki had hoped it to be. Instead, it was the supervising teacher of Sakurasou, Sengoku Chihiro.

Chihiro looked at the sekihan on the table, then looked over at Mashiro and Nanami, then asked Sorata:

"So, who did you do it with?"

"Sensei, I'll forget what you just said, now could you please get out and redo your entrance once more!"

"I'll say the same thing each time, are you sure you'll be able to take it?"

"I'll collapse for sure! That one time was enough."

Nanami was frozen in place, her face red with embarrassment.

"Aoyama, if you sue her for sexual harassment you'll definitely win. I'll be your eyewitness in court, so you won't have to worry about a thing."

"S-Sensei, what are you saying!"

After a slight pause, Nanami yelled out at Chihiro in protest, having reverted to her Kansai accent. However, Chihiro completely ignored her and continued along that topic of conversation.

"So, who's the lucky one?"

"Kanda-san's presentation was very successful, so we're helping him celebrate! No one did it! I know eating sekihan is weird, but by the time I came back from work Kamiigusa-senpai had already made some..."

Nanami explained deftly, having regained her composure. Chihiro didn't seem particularly interested.

"Whatever, since Kamiigusa did it I guess there's nothing I can say."

The very mention of her name alone was enough for Chihiro to understand the situation, which once again made Sorata marvel at Misaki's influence.

"Ah, Sensei."

"What?"

"My project is going to be supervised over by Kazuki-san."

"So?"

"Nothing, I just figured that it would be better to mention it to you."

Chihiro acted as if she was tired of listening to them, and she snatched the spoon out of Sorata's hand, grabbing a scoop of sekihan along the way.

"Hmm, this isn't half bad."

She continued eating.

"Ah, that's right, Aoyama."

"What is it?"

Probably because of what had happened earlier, Nanami suddenly turned cold towards Chihiro.

"This came in the mail for you."

She held out an A4-sized envelope.

Nanami's expression changed drastically as soon as she got a look at it. The relaxed atmosphere from earlier completely disappeared as her body tensed and her gaze sharpened.

Her breathing became irregular as well.

She had a very good idea of what was inside that fairly thin envelope.

It was probably the scripts that would be used in her auditions next month.

"Aoyama, take this."

Sorata took out a letter opener from one of the drawers and passed it to Nanami.

Nanami took it without a word and tore open the envelope.

Everyone's gazes turned towards her.

Inside the envelope were about ten sheets of paper. Although they were light, the meaning they held for Nanami was incredibly heavy. The two years of effort she had put in would now be put to the test by these scripts. Good or bad, she only had one shot. The auditions next month would decide her fate, they would decide whether she would be legible to go for actual training...for Nanami who had promised her father that she would return to Osaka if she were to fail, it was a huge turning point in her life.

Nanami bit her lip lightly, and her gaze had a steely glint in. She breathed out slowly, and she spoke in a low, solemn voice, all the while appearing as if she was looking back upon and reviewing every single bit of effort she had put in thus far:

“The time has finally arrived...”

Chapter 4

The Girls' War

The atmosphere at Sakurasou after Sorata had completed his presentation seemed to carry hints of slight tension, but time continued to pass day by day, steadily and peacefully. It must have been because everyone had their own goals to work towards, and they all focused on the things they should be doing.

Sorata was focused on touching up and simplifying the details of his project; Mashiro was drawing manga and reading; Misaki was once again producing animation; Ryuunosuke was focused on his programming; and last but not least Nanami was already preparing for her auditions on February 14th. Jin, who had not yet returned since Christmas night, was also hard at work preparing for his entrance exams as they were approaching soon.

Because of this, even though everyone had their own unstable, nervous emotions to balance and grapple with for themselves, they managed to get through a whole month without hiccups.

During this period, Sorata and Kazuki had held two discussions and had also successfully thought up some suggestions that were approved by the panel as well. They discussed some of those right then and there, while they pondered over other issues individually.

Kazuki's advices were mostly helpful, and his words were persuasive as well, leaving people with a striking impression of their product. His choice of words were also simple and easily understandable yet concise and direct, seemingly having had

carefully chosen his words in a manner that a high school student like Sorata could comprehend without difficulty.

Their first discussion was directly related to Sorata's project,<Rhythm Battler>, of which they realized the importance of utilizing the music itself in their marketing or publicity campaigns.

"An easily accessible control scheme is important, not to mention the scope and flexibility of the game itself, but since it's a music game, we now have the main factor that will decide the viability of the product in the market. After all, it is a music game."

"I see your point...so you're asking what sort of music should we use...all this while I've been brushing that aside by thinking I'll just use some RPG battle music without any particular reason, so I guess I haven't really touched on that."

"Right, so let's have our next discussion when you've figured out the overall direction you plan on heading towards with your music."

After which came the second discussion, where they decided on the overall direction of the music to be used in the game.

During break periods, Sorata would listen to the advice Kazuki would constantly give him based on his numerous experiences stemming from working in the industry for many years. Of which he could still remember some of them, mainly those related to the qualities a successful developer must have, things like that.

"What do you think is the most important thing a successful game developer needs?"

"Good social or communication skills?"

“Why do you think so?”

“Because I see that being mentioned often in developer interviews in magazines, I guess.”

“So why do you think that’s important?”

“Because making a game is an organizational...a group effort.”

He had saw that in magazines as well, as he was merely regurgitating content.

“So, all in all, what do you think good communication skills actually entail?”

“Um, interpersonal skills, being able to get along with the people around you...being able to cooperate and work with your surroundings?”

He didn’t exactly know how to answer the question.

“I see, cooperation, huh? It’s true, you can interpret game developing as a position that requires you to work as a team, and also requires you to have good communication skills.”

“Is that not it?”

“I didn’t say you were wrong. Communication skills are important, but it’s wrong to just take this at face value. But, I guess the reason why Sorata-san’s getting this wrong is because the people who emphasize the need for these skills themselves aren’t actually looking deeply enough into what the words actually mean.”

“Is...that so?”

“Yes, it’s not uncommon for people to simply take the opinion that ‘having good communication skills is important’ and just

regurgitate it along to the next person as if it were their own opinion without fully digesting the meaning of the phrase itself."

"Now that you mention it..."

He did understand what Kazuki meant. After all, he was doing the very same thing, in a sense.

"But, don't you think it's rather strange? Communication, as we refer to it as, is referring to the act of conversing with someone while correctly conveying each other's views and opinions, right? But these very people who go on and on about the importance of such kills, why is it that when they advocate this opinion, they don't actually go into the very essence of the words they are saying? By doing this they aren't completely conveying the full meaning of those words, so why aren't they doing so in order to prevent any misunderstandings, and to set an example for the very cause they are speaking out for?"

"..."

"If the reason is simply because there's not enough space allocated in that specific magazine column, or maybe the developer himself is lazy, it's fine. Like what I just said, people who don't actually understand the essence of the very words they are speaking are all over the place. If you take opinions or views that you may have heard from others, and assimilate them into your own feelings or words, you shouldn't be at that terminal of a stage just yet."

"I see."

"Basically, what I think communication skills are is the ability to correctly bring out your opinion from the information you already

have at hand, then using your own words to convey this opinion, adding your own thoughts into it in the process."

"..."

"At the same time, this must also entail the compromise of accepting the other party's viewpoints, being able to comprehend the actual meaning of the other party's words while at the same time listening to everything they have to say. Since not everyone who is speaking can perfectly convey everything they are trying to say, the listener's cooperation is also extremely important. Hence, communication skills is not referring to being able to read the atmosphere of the situation, then giving up up your own thoughts and views to accept that of another's, it's not a surface-level compromise like that is."

"..."

"I get that I'm being pretty long-winded, but when you speak, you need to have a complete and utter grasp of your own thoughts and opinions before you attempt to convey them onto another; on the other hand, when listening you don't just have to listen to everything the other party has to say, but also try to figure out the very essence of what that person may mean...that's for sure. During discussions or meetings, this will reduce the occurrences of words like 'but' or 'however' with regards to another's opinion, and also help to build a bridge towards a constructive and beneficial discussion."

"I see..."

Sorata was in agreement with his words, and he could merely nod in accordance.

“But, you mustn’t get tricked.”

“Huh?”

“From all that I’ve said earlier, I myself only believe about half of it.”

“Half?”

“I’m referring to the part about qualities. The necessary qualities a game developer must have.”

“And what are those?”

He needed to know.

“I think communication skills really are important. But, as long as you’re working in society, no matter what job you take up, this is necessary of you, right? Don’t you think that just mentioning this alone is akin to having no other talents of note at all?”

This did seem like a comment Kazuki, who had developed games for many years, would make.

But, what were the other qualities?

“...”

“Don’t you get it? The answer’s simple, really. Even if both parties can communicate and get to know each other extremely well through discussions, no matter how well they are able to combine their ideas and opinions, if the final product isn’t of a high enough quality, it’s meaningless. Especially in a job like ours that requires finished product.”

“Which means...”

“Basically speaking, if you don’t have the creativity to turn your ideas and concepts into reality, there is absolutely no meaning to your work. Which is also why communication is sometimes considered unnecessary in the industry.”

“...”

“Am I being too abstract here?”

“No, I understand perfectly.”

“Perfectly?”

“That’s because the person who helped me with all the concept illustrations...she’s exactly like what you’ve been describing.”

The creativity to acquire results through carrying out the measures needed to do so. Maybe, just maybe, Mashiro did have her own procedure of doing things, but Sorata couldn’t seem to tell whether she did have one, nor did she seem to give off the sense that she had one. Honestly, Sorata felt that it didn’t matter either way.

To him, Mashiro could create emotions on a blank sheet of canvas simply with a few strokes of the brush.

Even when he had asked her to help out with the concept art for his game, even though he couldn’t tell whether she really understood what he wanted of her through her words or actions at the time, she ended up delivering exactly what he needed anyway. That was always the case.

“Annoying software programmers are everywhere in my company too. They don’t like discussing or compromising, they’re always antisocial and introverted, and they never seem to contribute anything useful during verbal discussions. Sometimes I get extra

angry at these people who simply give up on the art of conversation just because they weren't good at it in the first place."

"Is it really alright for you to be saying things like that?"

"It's fine, I was just about to get to the good parts anyway. I've always held true in the belief that the most important component in game production is good programmers. No matter how good your ideas are, you won't be able to actualize them without the help of these people. One excellent programmer alone can drastically change the overall quality of a product. No matter how advanced game engines or developer tools get, this point will probably never change."

Sorata was vaguely reminded of Ryuunosuke.

"All in all, without the ability of the true developers, the ones that actually produce content like the programmers, concept artists, or those working in the sound department; neither developers, directors nor producers wouldn't be able to do anything."

That may be true. Although he had previously taken part in game developing, the only things Sorata could claim he actually "produced" were merely things utilized only in the planning stages of the project.

"All in all, I hope that you can become a project supervisor who can not only have faith in these producers of content, but also deal with their personalities. If you think you can, you'll naturally be able to acquire the so-called good communication skills you were talking about earlier."

Kazuki's words had managed to convert the emotions that had not yet fully taken form within Sorata's heart into words that he could understand easily. Previously he only had a vague idea of what he should work towards as a developer, but now those goals were clear to him, as if they were being pointed out by a compass.

It was because of these meaningful, experience-based dialogues with Kazuki that Sorata felt that their two discussions in the middle and end of January, respectively, were exceptionally important.

He was able to naturally keep in good spirits, and his days grew increasingly productive. Under these conditions, his emotions were more stable as well, allowing him to help Nanami practice for her impending auditions while juggling his own project's preparations, not to mention the long-overdue spring cleaning of Sakurasou that he was unable to do at the end of the past year.

Nanami's rehearsals were carried out in their school's recording studio where even large amounts of noise wouldn't disturb anyone outside. Those rehearsals came once a week, two hours per session.

Since recording facilities were available there, Nanami could immediately verify her performance.

"Don't you ever find that your own voice always sounds a little weird when listening to it yourself?"

"When I started off it did, but I got used to it. If you don't do so you'll never improve, and so whenever you try putting a little more emotions into your lines you'll find that it's surprisingly difficult."

Sorata's job was to act as a honorary judge and also to operate the recording apparatus.

They had received two scripts beforehand that would be used in the auditions, among which the one to judge her narrative abilities was a well-known Japanese fairytale, and the other that would be used to judge her acting talents was none other than a scene from Shakespeare's "Hamlet".

Since Sorata had neither read nor watched any of Shakespeare's works, he didn't actually know the details of the plot, but he could tell from Nanami's lines that the scene she was going to be auditioned on was a rather important one.

Nanami's role was the female lead, Ophelia, and in that scene she was supposed to be bidding Hamlet farewell.

Since Nanami had said it would be fine even if he were to just directly read from the script, Sorata agreed to rehearse along with her a few times.

Despite the fact that he had filmed the entire scene with the apparatus available, Sorata didn't dare to view his own performance, although he was sure he wasn't that bad. Nanami chuckled lightly, presumably because she had had a firsthand view of his stage antics.

"Aren't you being a little too much to an outsider like me, Nanami?"

"You make a unique Hamlet."

"I'm sure my performance doesn't matter as much as yours!"

"When I feel down in the future, I'll be sure to remember this moment."

"Forget everything you just saw immediately!"

Every time Sorata assisted Nanami with her rehearsals, Mashiro would never fail to tag along, and she would simply read shoujo manga silently at the back of the studio. She was beginning to tear through many older titles at an alarming rate.

"Shiina, is that manga interesting?"

"I'm not sure."

"I see..."

The thing was that no matter what manga Mashiro would be reading at the time, Sorata would always receive the same answer. She had previously said that she was learning from them, but whatever she may have been planning to learn was lost in translation.

Their peaceful yet productive days passed just like that, and soon ten days had passed in the month of February.

February the twenty-second, a Saturday. On this day, Sorata's sister, Yuuko would be arriving at Sakurasou in order to take her entrance exams for Seiko High. Sorata, who had been informed in advance that his sister would be arriving on the Shinkansen in the evening, had went over to the station to pick her up, having taken her stubbornness into consideration.

Having just arrived at Sakurasou, Yuuko became extremely excited as soon as she entered her brother’s room.

"Wow-! There's so many cats in here. What's this poster over here? Nyanboron? Ah - this room is filled with Nii-chan's smell."

Her half-day long journey didn’t seem to have affected her at all.

“Aren’t you tired?”

“I slept well on the ride here already, so I’m feeling energetic as always now.”

“This is the time where you should be studying like a proper student. If you can’t sleep at night and end up dozing off during the exams tomorrow, I won’t be there to help.”

“Ah! I never thought of that possibility. What should I do? Nii-chan, I think I’m finished.”

“Relax. You’re finished either way.”

“Oh, right...wait, that’s not good.”

Considering how energetic she was now, she should be tired by tonight, which would allow her to have a good rest in preparation for the next day.

“Nii-chan’s always being mean to me, I’m going to expose your screts!”

As she said this, Yuuko immediately scrambled under Sorata’s bed.

“Oi, idiot! That’s-!”

“I’m sure you have those DVDs featuring people doing all sorts of things to their sisters anyway!”

“Who would want those things in the first place!”

He grabbed Yuuko by the legs and dragged her kicking and screaming out of the mattress. At this point, he wouldn’t even care if her skirt were to lift up, exposing her panties in the process.

However, he was still too late, as Yuuko was already holding onto something.

“I’ve got you now!”

What Yuuko held up was nothing but a manga magazine.

“...Huh?”

It was a shoujo manga, at that, which would explain her surprise.

“Why would the magazine that serializes Mashiro-san’s manga be in Nii-chan’s room?”

Because he bought it, of course.

“Why would you hide it under your bed like that?”

Because he wanted to keep it secret, of course.

“Unless, Nii-chan’s actually the writer!”

How is that possible? The reason was actually that Sorata figured he might as well boost the sales of her work, no matter how little of a difference it may make, so he would secretly buy a copy of that magazine each month, without Mashiro knowing of course.

No matter what, he had to snatch that magazine away from Yuuko and put it back underneath his bed. Mashiro could return at any time. Just as he was thinking this, he heard footsteps approaching his room.

“Sorata.”

The voice clearly belonged to Mashiro. She sure picked a good time to arrive.

Sorata quickly grabbed the magazine from Yuuko and threw it back under his bed. After which he turned around to face her, trying his best to look as natural as possible in the process.

“Nii-chan, don’t treat Mashiro-san’s manga like that.”

“What’s that about my manga?”

Mashiro tilted her head to the side slightly in apparent confusion, and for some reason she was wearing nothing but a bath towel. Risque indeed. Her shoulders, arms and chest area were billowing with steam from her hot bath, and with her faintly pink-tinted skin, along with the sweat trickling down her face, she seemed exceptionally sexy. Even her hair was still dripping with water.

“Ah, n-no. There’s nothing wrong. Oh right! We were just talking about how your manga’s been doing recently.”

“It’s been confirmed that it’ll be featured on the front cover as well as the color splash pages next month.”

“Oh, really now? That’s great.”

Being featured on the cover would probably mean an active recognition of her work and her popularity. Nothing less than expected of Mashiro. Just as Sorata was able to painstakingly take a step forward, she had already leaped past an entire hurdle.

“But I can’t slack off now.”

“...Let me guess, that’s what your editor Iida-san told you, right?”

Mashiro nodded.

“Surveys showed that the overall reception is perfectly fine, but that’s just with regards to my artistic abilities.”

“I see.”

“If I can’t turn this into a television serial, the ratings will fall.”

“Did Iida-san say that too?”

Mashiro nodded again. It seems that he had successfully averted the magazine crisis for now. Even though it wouldn’t matter that much even if he were to be found out, since he’d managed to keep it a secret for so long, it would be hard for him to own up at this point.

“Wait a second, this isn’t the time to be chit-chatting casually, is it!”

Yuuko butted in agitatedly.

“Mashiro-san, get a hold of yourself! Nii-chan, run quickly! You’ll be attacked!”

“Speaking of which, Shiina, what are you doing exactly?”

Sorata asked, ignoring Yuuko for now.

“I went for a shower.”

“Sure you did, because no one in hell goes to the toilet like that! Why aren’t you wearing any clothes!?”

“Because Sorata wasn’t around.”

It was true, since her clothes were prepared by Sorata every day.

“Didn’t I say earlier that I would be going out to pick up Yuuko?”

“I heard you.”

“So you should have known I wouldn’t be around, right?”

“Sorata, you can do anything if you put your mind to it.”

“But I can’t teleport nor clone myself! I am a normal human being, you hear me!”

“Sorata.”

“What is it now!”

“How long are you planning to stare?”

Mashiro averted her eyes suddenly. Her cheeks flared up slightly, and it didn’t seem to be due to the heat from her shower.

“I think I feel embarrassed.”

“What!”

“R-right, Nii-chan, you pervert, lecher, sexual predator!”

“If you had any shred of self-consciousness, you wouldn’t be heading out dressed like that! What if I were to lose control of myself in front of my sister!”

“Nii-chan is a beast! A beast is Nii-chan!”

Yuuko had already worked up a rather noticeable temper, and she was beginning to spout nonsense.

Sorata left Yuuko in his room with his seven cats, while he himself brought Mashiro up to her room on the second floor to put some clothes on.

After picking out everything from her undergarments to her pajamas, and even a thick sheep-fur made sweater, Sorata sighed and trudged back to his room.

When he arrived, he found Yuuko standing on his bed like an angered bouncer. Although it wasn’t intimidating in the slightest...

“Nii-chan, you sit over there.”

“Fine, fine.”

Sorata sat down at the edge of the bed.

“Sit up straight.”

“Nope.”

“You haven’t reflected enough on your actions!”

Yuuko puffed up her cheeks and grabbed onto Sorata’s arm, after which she began shaking his body from side to side, expressing her discontent.

However, her breathing soon became ragged, seemingly because she didn’t have much energy to begin with.

“N-Nii-chan, are you in a relationship with Mashiro-san?”

“Nope.”

“Then why would she come into your room wearing only a bath towel?”

“...”

“I know, you guys are friends with benefits.”

“Definitely not!”

“Then what?”

“That’s what I want to know myself...”

Both of them wanted to know. What exactly was the relationship between the two?

While both of them were searching their souls in an attempt to solve this answerless question, Mashiro returned to Sorata's room, having finished changing. She was wearing quite a few layers of clothing, and she had brought a hairdryer along.

Mashiro walked over to them without a word, after which she silently sat on Sorata's lap and passed him the hairdryer.

Since this had happened many times before, Sorata was no longer surprised by her actions. Sorata took the hairdryer from her calmly, then plugged it into a socket on the wall and began to dry her hair with the warm air emitting from it.

Yuuko watched with her mouth wide open in surprise at these developments.

"Y-you-you what are you -! Nii-chan!"

"The way you speak is strange."

"That's because I'm really affected by this!"

"I'm drying her hair with this hairdryer right here, can't you see?"

"..."

"..."

The atmosphere in the room instantly froze up.

"Liar! You guys are clearly flirting with each other!"

"..."

It was only now that Sorata attempted to analyze the situation that he was currently in.

He was sitting on the bed with Mashiro perching on his lap. And he was drying her hair.

"..."

It seems that Yuuko was right for once. Completely right. Sorata hadn't noticed this at all since he figured this was nothing compared to her walking in wearing nothing but a bath towel earlier.

"I'm sure there's nothing to get so worked up about."

Just as Sorata was trying to find an excuse for himself, Mashiro butted in for him.

Was she actually trying to assist Sorata?

"This always happens."

Nope.

"Don't act like you're trying to add fuel to the fire!"

"That's because Sorata seems troubled."

"I'm even more troubled!"

"I'm sure it'll be fine."

"What do you mean by that! Where? Which part of it looks fine to you!"

Mashiro turned to Yuuko and looked at her with an expression that seemed to say "What do you think?"

Speaking of Yuuko, her face was completely blank, and she began mumbling "thisisanightmarethisisanightmare" over and over to herself. It seemed that she had completely lost her senses.

“She’s pretty much unconscious now, isn’t she!?”

Could Yuuko really be expected to take her entrance exams tomorrow while in this condition? Although she couldn’t exactly be expected to pass, but that shock from earlier might have wiped everything she had studied from her memory. It would be sad if that were true.

“Sorata.”

“What?”

“Lions give it their all even when hunting rabbits.”

“That’s because, contrary to popular belief, lions are terrible at hunting!”

Despite the fact that she had shown knowledge of some unnecessary animal facts, Sorata couldn’t shake the thought that lions, although they may be kings of the jungle, might be incompetent in the same ways Mashiro was as well.

After Yuuko returned to her senses, the three of them, along with Misaki from room 201, went downstairs for dinner.

Recently Misaki had been cooping in her room for much longer periods of time in order to produce anime. Since third-year students like her no longer had scheduled classes after February, they could attend school as they pleased, and not to mention that her admission into the animation department of Suimei University of the Arts was all but confirmed; so she could pretty much spend all her time on her work now.

Even if she were to go out, the only places she would head to would either be the editing studio or the motion capture studio, both

located in her university. God knows what kind of life she was living - it definitely wasn't that of a normal female student.

"So, how's production coming along?"

"Only a few scenes and backgrounds haven't been drawn out, I'm leaving the effects and other things until later."

Misaki furiously shoved Sorata's cooking into her mouth.

On the surface, she seemed energetic as always, but it was different from her usual alien-like demeanor. Since Sorata knew the reason behind this, he decided to make the obvious decision not to question her about it.

Jin wasn't by her side. To Misaki, that was all that mattered.

"If I remember correctly, Jin-senpai's having his exams tomorrow as well, right?"

"Yeah..."

Misaki replied softly. Just as how Yuuko had to make her way here,for her own entrance examinations Jin was probably on his way to Osaka as well.

In the end, she was unable to give Jin the good-luck charm she had bought at Fukuoka before he left. Forget the charm, the two might not have even spoken a word to each other throughout the entire year.

Sometimes when Sorata was in school, he would see Jin looking at Misaki from the depths of a stairwell or from a distant window, but in the end all he did was look. Up until the very end...

"Senpai, are you going to continue working after this?"

“Nope, I’m done for today. I still have things to do after this.”

“I’m full.” As she said this, Misaki stood and took out some pieces of chocolate from the kitchen fridge, then placed them within a large bowl. After that, she placed the bowl within a pan containing boiling water, allowing the pieces of chocolate to slowly melt.

As soon as they had melted sufficiently, she began scraping into heart-shaped molds with a rubber spatula. She then placed them on her lap and began to watch them solidify.

It seems that she intended to make simple chocolates this time. Last year she had carved her own likeness on brick-shaped slabs of chocolate and gave them to Jin.

“If I were Sorata, where would I begin eating this?”

Jin had actually pondered that question for quite some time.

“Although I didn’t get to give him the good-luck charm after all...I’ll try my best this time around.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to give this to him.”

“Yeah...”

While waiting for the chocolates to solidify, Misaki didn’t budge in the slightest. She must have been thinking of Jin, as her expression was incredibly gentle.

Although Mashiro appeared to be watching somewhat jealously, she never revealed any hint of wanting to have a go at it herself. It was probably because that she still remembered the time she got into a fight with Sorata for injuring herself the last time she tried cooking.

But if Mashiro were to make some, who would she give them to? Sorata couldn't help but feel a slight tinge of curiosity and anticipation.

"Nii-chan, you've been staring at Mashiro-san all this time!"

"Y-you misunderstand!"

"Sorata's always staring at me."

"It's not as bad as you think it is!"

Ignoring the squabbling group, Misaki placed the solidified chocolates into a box she had prepared earlier, wrapped it up with pink wrapping paper and tied a butterfly knot on it, after which she took the finished box of Valentines' chocolates gingerly up to her room. Sorata felt rather conflicted whilst watching her do so.

He genuinely hoped that she would be able to pass it to Jin this time.

After waiting for Yuuko to leisurely finish her meal, he brewed a pot of tea for everyone.

"Nii, where's Nanami-san?"

"She has to work part-time and take voice acting lessons on weekends, so it'll probably be ten or later by the time she comes back."

"Huh-! Really? I had some things to ask her too."

"Nanami's going through a really important period of her life now, so when she comes back I don't want you going around giving her trouble, understand?"

The auditions that would decide her future were on the 14th, a Monday...meaning two days later.

Nanami was unable to remain calm throughout the week, despite her usual composure. She had forgotten that she was on grocery shopping duties and returned empty-handed; once she forgot to turn on the water heater and nearly had a cold shower; three days before she overslept and was almost late for school. In the end Sorata had noticed and woke her up, leading to a situation where the both of them had to rush to school with Mashiro in tow.

"Can you sleep at night?"

"Um...not really."

Nanami had so much trouble sleeping that sometimes she would only fall asleep just a few hours before school.

Thus, since three days earlier, Sorata had took over all of Nanami's chores in Sakurasou.

He had originally thought that Nanami would never agree to a proposal like that, but to his surprise she accepted it right off the bat.

"What's with that surprised look you've got there?"

"I'm not surprised."

"Liar, I bet it's because I took up your offer."

"...I-I guess."

"That's because I don't want things to end up like during the summer holidays where I got told off by you for pushing myself too hard."

As Nanami finished her sentence, she had chuckled slightly. Although Sorata felt that he wasn't all that naggy...

"I'm back."

Speak of the devil. Even though it was only about eight-thirty PM, Nanami had already returned, and she quickly appeared in the dining room.

"Ah, Nanami-san."

"Oh, welcome, Yuuko! How have your studies been coming along since our visit?"

"Perfectly fine. I'm going to pass these exams for sure."

"No one asked about what you've been daydreaming of recently..."

Nanami smiled at this quip.

"Aoyama, if you're hungry, there are some leftovers, would you like some? I'll heat them up now."

"Oh, OK. I didn't have time to eat before work, so can I trouble you to do that for me?"

"The bath water's ready too, so would you like to bathe or eat first?"

"Huh?"

Yuuko appeared to have received some form of shock.

"Sorry to trouble you, I think I'd prefer to eat first."

Nanami nodded in agreement.

"Also, you left your clothes outside for quite a while. I've already folded them and put them back in your room."

“I-It’s fine, you could have just left them there.”

“Nii-chan, you’re too gentle...”

Yuuko said softly, in a dissatisfied tone.

“It’s fine, I figured you would be coming back late again today, so...”

“T-thanks.”

Nanami usually dried her underwear in her room, so even if Sorata were to fold up her clothes all he would get to see were her shirts or socks.

If Mashiro had not arrived, Sorata would probably feel nervous just by touching a girl’s clothes, let alone folding them. Now he could perform the latter action without a second thought. Although it wasn’t exactly something to brag about...

Nanami said something about putting her bag down then rushed up to the second floor.

“N-Nii-chan, what was that all about!?”

“What are you being so emotional for?”

“Of course I’m goddamn emotional! I’m about to explode! What’s the relationship between you and Nanami?”

“Huh?”

“Why would you say things like ‘If you’re hungry, I’ll prepare some food for you to eat’ so tenderly, not to mention that ‘Would you like to bathe together?’ or that ‘I’ve helped you wash your clothes’ line? Why, why, why, why?”

“Isn’t your depiction far off from what actually happened?”

“This is the limit of my memorization abilities!”

“Oh, no wonder.”

“Why would Nii-chan do so many things for Nnami-san? This is suspicious, way too suspicious!”

“Sorata does a lot of things for me too.”

“That’s because you can’t help it, so never mind that!”

Even Mashiro didn’t expect something like that coming from Yuuko.

“To think that someone as prim and proper as Nanami-san would let Nii-chan prepare food for her, and ask her whether she wants to shower, and fold her clothes for her, there’s a huge problem here! This is beyond even a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, it’s basically something like that of a couple who have been staying together for over two years!”

“Where did you get all those all-too-realistically scary figures from...”

“Your conversation would naturally scare anyone anyway!”

Yuuko sank deep into thought.

“Ah! I’ve got it!”

She seemed to have realized something.

“The one I should be worrying about isn’t Mashiro-san, it’s Nanami-san. I’ve been blind all this time!”

She said something even stranger than usual.

“You’re pretty much blind normally anyway.”

“What does that mean!”

“I’ll use this opportunity to tell you this, you’re a really disappointing girl, you know that?”

“Compared to Mashiro-san?”

“No difference.”

“That bad?”

The reason why she was so shocked was probably because she thought she was at least superior than Mashiro.

“Shiina, you can get mad if you want.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

Mashiro suddenly directed a burst of murderous intent towards Sorata.

“E-exactly! We’re talking about your relationship with Nanami-san here. Good job, Mashiro-san!”

Yuuko yelled “Yeah!” while attempting to high-five Mashiro. However, since the both of them failed to synchronize the timing properly, their hands completely missed each other.

“...”

“...”

Faint whooshes of wind could be heard after their failed gesture. What were those two thinking, anyway?

“A-Anyway, what does Nii-chan think of Nanami-san?”

“What do you mean, what do I think?”

“Do you think of her as a woman?”

At this crucial moment, Nanami returned to the dining room, having already changed her clothes. She held a rubber band between her teeth, as she was redoing her hair.

“I heard something about me, what was it?”

Since Nanami had both her hands busy with her hair, the thin line on her chest was left defenseless, to which Sorata couldn’t help but direct a glance towards.

“Ah-! Nii-chan’s looking at Nanami-san with a perverted look on his face.”

“Huh, Kanda-san?”

The rubber band she was biting earlier fell onto the floor.

“D-don’t talk nonsense! I wouldn’t do something like that! I was just looking at her normally!”

“That’s because Sorata’s a pervert in the first place.”

Mashiro butted in softly.

“Why don’t I ever get a say for myself even though we’re in Sakurasou?”

Nanami, having finally finished up her hairdo, stared at Sorata like one would a criminal suspect.

“Could you please not avoid me that obviously?”

“If...”

“If?”

“If it’s just a little bit, it’s fine.”

“Huh?”

“Even if you look at me like that.”

Sorata’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“Ah...n-no! Wait! What are you saying?”

“Nanami-san!”

“N-nothing happened! I just...u-um, I’m going to sleep now! I’m going to take a shower!”

Nanami dashed out of the dining room in the direction of the toilet.

“Wait! What about your dinner?”

“W-we’ll deal with that after I shower!”

Nanami’s voice disappeared at the end of the corridor...the shower.

“Y-You both are too suspicious!”

“Not at all!”

“Then why are you angry!? Mom likes Nanami-san too...are you in a relationship? Are you getting married? What should I do, Nii-chan!”

“Mind your own business, you have an exam to worry about tomorrow.”

“You’re avoiding the subject.”

Yuuko puffed up her cheeks.

“I’m not!”

“You’re avoiding the subject.”

The assault came from Mashiro this time.

“I’m not trying to avoid anything! Speaking of which, since when were you both such good buddies!?”

This questioning continued all the way until Nanami finished her bath, and all the way until she finished her meal.

On the next day, the 13th, which was a Sunday, the skies were gray even as snowflakes fell from them.

Sorata sent Yuuko off to her examination venue dutifully, braving the weather.

Other than the examinations for the five main subjects, namely English, Mathematics, Japanese, Chemistry and Social Studies, she had to go for an interview as well. It was a tedious process that would take up an entire day’s worth of time.

Since he had nothing to do anyway, Sorata decided to return to Sakurasou in the interim. By the time he returned to Suiko to pick up Yuuko, the snow had fallen so much that his footsteps began to sink a little.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, Yuuko trudged lifelessly out of the school gates. To someone like Yuuko that had trouble focusing in the first place, it was probably especially tiring.

Sorata congratulated Yuuko and went along with her to the Shinkansen train station.

“But I want to stay with Nii-chan a little while longer.”

The reason why she had to return to Fukuoka right after her examinations was because their father had already pre-purchased a Shinkansen ticket valid for that day. It was probably because he wanted his daughter back by his side ASAP.

“Dad worries too much.”

“If you were my daughter, I think I would be able to understand his feelings.”

“Huh, does Nii-chan like me that much?”

“Let’s drop that topic for now, how were your exams today?”

“I wrote my name correctly on all the papers.”

Weren’t her expectations set a little too low?

“What about the interview?”

“Someone praised me by saying ‘It’s not bad to see someone this energetic’. At this rate, I’ll definitely pass.”

“Didn’t I already tell you that in this type of situation ‘energetic’ is pretty much a polite codeword for ‘idiot’?”

“So that actually meant something like ‘It’s not bad even if she’s an idiot’? Looks like I’m gonna pass after all!”

“Oh, if only.”

Even Sorata got tired of explaining.

When the both of them reached the station, Sorata passed Yuuko a bento and some tea he had brought along, along with some souvenirs and snacks she had wanted.

As if to return the favor. Yuuko took out a small package from her backpack and shoved it in Sorata's direction.

"I know it's a day early, but here you go."

She suddenly became adorable.

"I-I may have gotten mom's help, but this time the chocolates are handmade."

"Oh, I see...thanks."

Sorata was somewhat embarrassed by this.

"I won't lose to Mashiro-san or Nanami-san."

"I don't really get what you're trying to say, but there's not much time left before the train arrives. Hurry and get yourself up there."

"Right, I'll be back in April!"

Yuuko smiled a smile without any hints of suspicion and went on her merry way back to Fukuoka.

The results would be released a week later, and as per yearly custom they would be pasted on a gigantic signboard at the entrance to his school. Of course, Yuuko wouldn't come over all the way from Fukuoka just for that, so it was Sorata's job to go.

"Which basically means I'll be the one who has to give Yuuko the bad news."

As Sorata realized this, he suddenly began to hope that Yuuko would pass.

Yet another day passed after Yuuko's exams. Sorata had woken up much earlier on this day, and he immediately realized that something was amiss about himself. Undoubtedly, he was nervous.

February the 14th. For the rest of the world, it may be Valentine's Day, but in Sorata's head, all he could think of were Nanami's auditions.

Sorata went down to the dining hall to find Nanami already there, dressed in her usual school uniform to boot.

"Morning, Aoyama."

"Good morning, Kanda-san."

After a brief greeting, Nanami indicated that she was somewhat restless due to her anxiety and rushed off to school earlier.

As soon as Sorata finished sending her off, he left the dining room to wake Mashiro up.

Immediately as he did that, something shocking occurred. Mashiro was walking downstairs by herself. That may not seem special, but she was already all dressed in her uniform, jacket, scarf and gloves; the works. Even her bag, that Sorata would usually pack for her, was in her hands.

"Shiina, did you do all that yourself?"

"But of course."

"That's not convincing at all!"

At a glance, her preparations seemed complete...just as that thought crossed his mind, he noticed that she was only wearing a single sock.

“Is that a fashion statement?”

Mashiro looked down at her legs.

“It’s clearly a sock, but there’s only one of them.”

“That’s because they don’t naturally go around in pairs!”

Since kicking up a fuss wouldn’t do him any good, Sorata went upstairs and dug up a matching sock from Mashiro’s room, then went back downstairs.

After Mashiro wore it, her get-up was complete. Absolutely perfect. However, Sorata wasn’t the type of person to let her off like that. Especially since he had gotten into trouble many times due to her lack of common sense.

He needed to check on the areas that he couldn’t see as well.

“Don’t tell me you’re naked under your skirt, are you?”

Sorata said sheepishly, however Mashiro merely tilted her head slightly.

"You're wearing panties, right?"

"Yep."

"That's good."

"They're cute ones, too."

"I didn't need to know that!"

"..."

"You're wearing something on top too right?"

"They came in a set."

"Just give me the essentials! Don't tell me things I don't need to know!"

Anyway, her clothes seemed to be fine. Now all that was left was her bag. He didn't know whether she had packed all her necessities, so it would be safer to have a look inside.

Sorata nonchalantly stretched his hand in the direction of Mashiro's bag, however she displayed a feat of never-before-seen agility and grabbed hold of it before Sorata could reach it, where she proceeded to hug it tightly, preventing Sorata's advances.

"What was that for?"

It was rather strange.

"To think that you would want to peek into a girl's bag. How low of you."

"If this is considered low, what would you call all those other times when I was forced to supervise all your other more personal activities, huh!?"

"You're inhuman."

"What's with all the scolding this early in the morning?"

"Anything but the bag."

"I won't care even if you were to forget something. I'm not gonna help you this time."

"I put everything important into it already."

"Really now?"

"I put my back into it too."

"...Right, I don't really know how to respond to that, but whatever, I won't look into it. Not today and not for the rest of my life."

"Tomorrow it'll be fine."

"Huh?"

"I'll let you check it from top to bottom tomorrow."

She said he can't do it today, but it'll be fine tomorrow.

"..."

Today was Valentine's Day. Did that mean he could expect something from her?

"F-Forget it. It doesn't matter. After you finish your breakfast we're heading to school."

While Mashiro ate breakfast, Sorata went to his room to make his own preparations for school. Even while he was changing, he couldn't stop thinking of what Mashiro may have had in her bag.

Due to his preoccupied state, Sorata even forgot that he was supposed to be on grocery shopping duty that day.

It was only when he was putting on his shoes that he remembered to do so, and thus he returned to the kitchen and took out the common wallet of Sakurasou from one of the cabinets. Within it was money enough to feed the residents for a full month.

As he returned to the front door, he found Mashiro already there waiting for him.

"Right, let's go."

"Ok."

Sorata's gaze once again fell onto Mashiro's bag. If I expect too much, I'll only be even more disappointed. Don't forget that Mashiro completely lacks common sense. As Sorata told himself this, he walked out of Sakurasou with Mashiro, thinking about the groceries he would have to buy later.

As the both of them reached school, Sorata parted ways with Mashiro at the shoe cabinets as per normal. That was because Mashiro's art studio was on the opposite side of the hallway from Sorata's classroom.

Sorata blended into the crowds of students and walked up the stairs.

He got the impression that everyone around seemed to be nervous, and he didn't seem to be wrong. There were suspicious-looking male students lurking around the shoe cabinets as well, probably because they had unexpectedly received boxes of chocolates from equally unexpected people, which made Sorata rather envious.

Although there were only five minutes before the school bell would ring, less than half of Sorata's classmates had arrived. However, the same situation had occurred many times before, thus no one was all that surprised.

His eyes met with Nanami's, who had arrived before him. Although classes had not yet started, she was already sitting up straight. Sorata sat down quietly at his seat which was right beside hers.

"You could've just taken a day off today, you know."

"There'll still be time even after class ends, so I have no reason to do that."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"..."

"..."

The atmosphere in their classroom before their teacher entered was as relaxed as any other school day. However, only the atmosphere around Sorata and Nanami was different, and it didn't seem to be a Valentine's atmosphere either.

Their conversation was awkward and their tone was stiff and unnatural.

That was because there would be am audition deciding whether Nanami could or could not join the voice acting agency of her choice after school, so they were naturally tense.

"Um...I'm sorry."

Sorata said in order to break the suffocating silence between the two.

"What's the apology for?"

"I can't seem to think of anything encouraging to say."

"It's alright."

"Huh?"

"I wasn't expecting much from you anyway."

Nanami smiled intentionally as she said this. Sorata, on the other hand, felt increasingly useless as he was even more nervous than Nanami herself, and she actually had to comfort him instead.

"I'm hurt."

"Sorry."

"Nah, just kidding."

"Thanks for the well wishes. I'm really pleased, honestly."

Even though the rest of their class was causing a ruckus around them, Nanami's voice was still able to reach Sorata's ears.

"Aren't you nervous?"

"You only get one shot with auditions, so I would be lying if I said no. But..."

Nanami paused briefly and looked directly into Sorata's eyes.

"Kanda-san has given me courage."

"Me?"

"Because Kanda-san has already proven to me that as long as you work hard, you'll definitely be rewarded for it."

"...I see." She was right.

‘’’- Maybe Aoyama will be the one to prove that hard work will definitely be rewarded.’’’

Sorata had told her this before.

The one who was hoping the strongest for this to be proven might have been Aoyama all this time.

It had been two years. She had left her parents, she had taken up part time jobs to support herself and her vocal training fees, she had set herself a goal and never stopped working towards it, giving it all her time and effort...

Compared to Sorata, Nanami had put in many times more work. It was exactly because of this that she would be absolutely terrified if all this effort had gone to waste.

But, Nanami's expression didn't show it at all. She was merely hiding it from view to prevent others from worrying too much about her.

If she were to fail, it would mean that she had wasted two years of her life. Not to mention that her father was against all this in the first place, would that mean she would have to return to Osaka? The more Sorata thought about it, the more the unpleasant emotions within him spread throughout his body. Thus, he prayed from the bottom of his heart that Nanami would succeed. But, anything to do with that fateful decision, as well as anything that may happen after it was out of his control.

"Do you still remember what you promised me?"

"Huh?"

Sorata was slightly shocked, having had his train of thought derailed.

"Have you forgotten?"

What he promised her - he could remember only one thing.

"You mean that thing on Christmas night?"

"Yeah."

Nanami had said that she would tell Sorata something after her auditions.

"I remember it like it was yesterday."

"Really? That's good. I'm glad you remember."

"Oh, OK."

At this moment, the bell rang.

A few male students hurriedly rushed into class. Right behind those few, Ryuunosuke strolled in leisurely and sat down just as the bell had finished ringing. He sat right behind Nanami, which meant he sat diagonally behind Sorata.

"Morning, Akasaka."

"Mm."

Ryuunosuke replied briskly and took out a laptop computer from his bag which he promptly opened up. However, just as he was about to turn on the power, he seemed to have remembered something, and he stuffed it back into his bag just as quickly as he had pulled it out.

"What is it?"

Maybe he had forgotten to charge it. No, wait, it couldn't be, as if that were true he would merely plug his charger in and connect it to a socket. He would sometimes even do that in the middle of class just for the sake of maintaining power.

"The ponytailed one is having her auditions today, right."

"Yeah..."

Nanami who had never gotten along with Ryuunosuke immediately went on her guard.

"Don't tell me you're actually being considerate of her feelings?"

"If the noise coming from my keyboard happened to distract her from her thoughts, I wouldn't be able to live with her complaints."

"I definitely wouldn't complain."

"Women are illogical beings, therefore they cannot be trusted. Also, they're incredibly annoying."

"You're referring to her again, aren't you?"

Ryuunosuke's scowl all but confirmed Sorata's suspicions, and Rita's smiling face appeared in his mind.

"Oh well, I'm glad you decided to keep quiet for her sake."

"Then thank me however you like. Do note that I'll feel uncomfortable if the ponytailed one thanks me though, so if she does she's just making herself feel better."

"If so, I won't thank you then! Also, it was your fault in the first place!"

Ignoring Nanami's protests, Ryuunosuke pulled out his smartphone from his pocket and began fiddling with it.

After a while, Sorata's phone rang. He figured it was a message from Ryuunosuke or something and took it out to have a look, but to his surprise it was a text from Mashiro instead.

- After school, I'll be waiting for you on the rooftop.

"Huh?"

How should he interpret this?

"What is it?"

"Shiina just texted me."

"What did she say?"

"She said she'll be waiting for me on the rooftop after school."

After a brief pause, Nanami let out a long, meaningful sigh.

"Oh ---"

Both Mashiro's actions earlier this morning and her text message seemed different from her usual self. It may have been because today was Valentine's Day.

As Sorata considered this, he began to worry again, but this time for a different reason than Nanami's auditions. The feelings he had for Mashiro which he thought he had sealed away long ago were now seeping out bit by bit from the cracks within his heart. By the time he came to his senses, he couldn't wait for school to end.

Probably because he was looking forward to the end of school so much, Sorata felt that the day was extremely long, even though they only had six lessons.

Although he couldn’t wait to head up to the rooftop, it was Sorata’s duty to clean up the classroom on that day. To make matters worse, he had lost a game of rock-paper-scissors with cleaning duties on the line, leaving him with garbage duties for that day.

Sorata leisurely drifted through the hallways of his school, trash can in hand. Many couples were walking around as well, as that day was Valentine's Day.

Just as he was approaching the garbage dump behind the school blocks, he spotted a familiar figure near the shoe cabinets.

"Senpai."

Sorata called out to Misaki. As she turned around to answer him, another girl who was with her turned around as well. The girl was Himemiya Saori, whose tall and lanky figure stood out in contrast to Misaki's more petite one. Her headphones were hung around her neck.

"Did you happen to lose the garbage janken[16]?"

"Yep."

Sorata and Saori's eyes met, and they nodded in acknowledgment of each other.

"Hello."

Saori calmly raised a hand in greeting.

"What are you both doing here?"

"Waiting for Jin."

"Oh."

He realised that the answer to this question was obvious, as Misaki was holding onto the Valentine's chocolate she had made the other day.

"The thing is, did Jin-senpai even come to school today?"

Third-year students could now come and go from school as they pleased, and since he had exams coming up as well, he should have left for Osaka last weekend already.

---

[16] Janken is Japanese slang for rock-paper-scissors.

"He left early this morning, so he should be back by now. Also, Souichiro said that he would definitely bring him back, so we can't be mistaken."

"Hao..."

"Hao?"

Just as Sorata unwittingly blurted out the first half of her nickname, he was met with a sudden burst of killing intent.

"I-I'm sorry, um, Himemiya-senpai...your boyfriend, or should I say the former student council president will being him back?"

"B-boyfriend? You're being too nosey, aren't you."

She seemed to be a tough and reliable person, however she didn't seem to be all that good at such areas of conversation.

"Right then, I'll be taking my leave for now."

"Mm."

"Misaki-senpai."

"What is it, Kouhai-kun?"

"I'll be rooting for you."

"Right, I'll do my best."

Misaki nodded vigorously.

"You sure have some good juniors."

Saori mumbled quietly to herself.

After he parted ways with the two girls, Sorata continued his journey towards the garbage dump along the path behind the school blocks.

The fact that he couldn't let Mashiro wait too long, as well as a sudden spike of excitement and anticipation caused his heart to begin pounding non-stop.

He dumped the trash in the garbage bin he was holding into the dumpster.

On his way back, he realised that he was quite literally jogging.

Suddenly, the cellphone in his pocket began to ring, could it be a message from Mashiro pestering him to hurry? No, it was a phone call.

When he took the phone out from his pocket, the words "Aoyama Nanami" were displayed upon its screen.

His body reacted before the rest of him could. First his heart began pounding, then a bad feeling came over him. Nanami had left right after homeroom for her auditions. It wouldn't be all that surprising if she was already on the train there, thus Sorata couldn't think of a reason why she would be calling at this time.

Sorata accepted the call and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Aoyama?"

"What should I do, Kanda-san!"

Nanami was once again speaking in her native Kansai accent, and her voice was filled with so much uneasiness that it felt like she might start crying at any moment.

"What happened?"

Sorata replied as calmly as he could.

"It's over."

"Calm down. What happened?"

"The train services stopped."

"Why? Was there an accident?"

"Yeah...It appears there was a fatal traffic accident."

"Did they announce when services would resume?"

"The people at the station said...they don't know when they'll resume services..."

As if to shake awake his hibernating brain cells, Sorata shook his head and began to think as fast as he could.

"I can't take this anymore, why does this have to happen now?"

"Have you contacted the agency? As long as you explain your circumstances, you should be fine right?"

"I tried that already, but they said they can only postpone the time and not the date...my auditions are pretty late in the first place, but if I don't arrive before six, everyone else would be done already..."

Sorata didn't have his watch with him so he couldn't confirm the time at that exact moment, but since he had sat through six hours of lessons and had just finished sweeping the floor, it was probably somewhere between three-thirty and four.

If services were to resume, she would probably be able to reach within an hour. However, there was no guarantee when or whether

this would happen at all, so they couldn't afford to take this chance. If too much time were to pass between that and now, she wouldn't be able to reach.

"Everything's gonna be fine."

"Kanda-san?"

"Aoyama, which station are you at?"

"Two stops away from Suiko."

"I'm on my way, so just wait for me."

"Huh?"

"You can get out of the train car, right?"

"Yeah, I'm currently calling from the station balcony." "Right, wait for me at the ticketing stations, I'll be right there."

As he finished his sentence, he immediately dropped the trashcan he was holding and dashed out of class.

Sorata hung up the phone after Nanami replied softly with an "OK".

Although getting Misaki to drive them there would be a more reliable way of tackling this situation, he knew that he couldn't get in her way today. She had her own problems to deal with. If he were to bother Misaki for Nanami's sake, she wouldn't able to get over the guilt. He absolutely couldn't let that happen.

As he was pondering this, he suddenly thought of Mashiro. Should he go to the roof first? No, there was no time, he didn't have any moments to spare.

Sorata pulled out his phone and began typing out Mashiro's phone number with his restless and imprecise fingers.

The caller ringtone came on, but Mashiro had yet to reply. Just as Sorata was praying that she would do so, the line successfully connected.

"Shiina, I'm sorry. I'll be a little late..."

Just as Sorata was blabbering on about the whole scenario, he realised that he was connected to her voice mail. Please leave a message after the beep.

"I'll be a little late, since Aoyama's immobilised due to an abortion in train services. It's cold outside, so wait for me in class."

After that, he returned his phone to his pocket and began running once more.

Just as he was dashing outside while still in his indoor shoes, a bicycle suddenly darted out from the parking lot right beside the door.

"Careful!"

The student on the bike hurriedly put on the brakes. Although the screeching noise generated from that was almost deafening, it didn't seem to have fazed him at all.

"Sorry, I didn't see you coming...oh? Kanda-san, so it's you."

The student on the bike was none other than Sorata's roommate before he was shifted to Sakurasou, Miyahara Daichi.

Sorata blurted out without thinking:

"Miyahara, lend me your bike!"

"What's this all of a sudden? You catching a thief or something?"

"Nanami's stuck on the train because services were temporarily stopped! She has auditions today."

"..."

"It's really urgent!"

"Right, I get it, hop on!"

"Miyahara?"

"Just get on the damn bike already."

Sorata placed his hands on Miyahara's shoulders and put his legs on the bar holding the back wheels together, after which Miyahara began pedaling as fast as he could.

"Hey, you two, you can't have two passengers on a bike!"

"We'll surrender ourselves later, so please turn a blind eye for now."

Daichi called out to the teachers who were on guard duty at the school gate.

"Miyahara, please head to the second station down this way."

"Roger that!"

Daichi accelerated once more, completely ignoring Sorata's presence. Even while going up steep slopes, he didn't show any signs of slowing down. Nothing less than to be expected of a member of their school's swim team.

"What happened to your club activities?"

"We're having a break today."

"Sorry to disturb you on your day off."

"I was planning to practice my cross-country running today, so I guess there isn't much of a difference."

"You really are a fitness freak."

"Yep."

Even as the two exchanged lighthearted banter, the bike showed no signs of slowing down. Daichi's bike proceeded forward swiftly and surely, and before long they had reached the arduous path spanning the distance between the station adjacent to Suiko High and their destination. A gigantic hill bridged the two stations, so getting there would be equivalent to climbing a fairly sized mountain.

About halfway there, Daichi's pace finally decreased.

"I'm gonna get down and run there."

"Just stay where you are!"

His breathing became ragged. Sorata felt Daichi's body heaving along to the rhythm of his breath.

"Don't you dare underestimate a proud member of Suiko High's swim team!"

Just like that, Daichi furiously pedalled up the hill spanning the two stations.

However, his energy could only last him up to the summit, and the bike stopped abruptly there. Even though only the descent remained.

"Hey, Miyahara."

Daichi appeared to collapse from the top of the bicycle, after which he handed it over to Sorata. He seemed to be trying to tell him something, but he was too out of breath to do so. Despite this, he managed to squeeze out what little voice he had remaining:

"I...can't go on...now the rest is up to you, Kanda...get your ass over there!" As he heard him say this, Sorata finally realized why Daichi had stopped him from getting off the bike and running there himself earlier. He had planned to do this from the very beginning. Words and sentences began to form within Sorata's mind in an attempt to thank Daichi. Although Sorata had merely offered a brief explanation as to what exactly was going on, Daichi had realized the gravity of the situation and had tried his best to get him over to Nanami as fast as he could.

"Thanks!"

"Hey, Kanda."

"What is it?"

Daichi attempted to regain a normal pattern of breathing, and he stood up with his legs quaking in an unstable fashion, placing his hands on Sorata's back in the process.

"If you don't think this through, I can, and I will, punch you."

"Huh?"

"Think about it, when Aoyama got into this situation, the first person she called was you!"

Daichi mustered all the remaining strength he had to push Sorata down the hill, causing the bicycle to descend rapidly.

“Since you’re so gentle towards her, you should just tell her how you feel!”

Daichi’s voice quickly grew increasingly distant and soft as Sorata drew further away.

Sorata didn’t turn around. However, Daichi’s words remained engraved deeply upon his mind. He told himself that it wouldn’t do him any good to be thinking about that for now, as his main priority was to get to Nanami.

Since the most difficult part of the journey had been handled by Daichi, only the descent was left, thus Sorata was able to reach his destination fairly quickly.

Just as he reached the station, he immediately put on the brakes and began searching for Nanami.

“Kanda-san!”

He heard a hoarse cry from behind him, and he turned around to find that it was indeed Nanami. The only thing off about her was that she seemed depressed, as if the world would end at any moment.

“Aoyama, over here!”

Sorata jumped off the bicycle and grabbed onto Nanami’s arm just as she was about to say something, then dragged her off to a taxi stand. Three people were in line, however two of them had managed to get a cab just as the two arrived there, leaving only one remaining.

“I don’t have the money.”

Nanami whispered quietly.

Sorata whipped out a brilliantly colored wallet from the pocket of his uniform. However, it wasn't his own.

"That's Sakurasou's..."

It was the common wallet that the residents of Sakurasou contributed to in order to purchase food and other groceries. Since he had looked inside it earlier, he knew there were two ten-thousand-yen bills inside and lots of small change.

"Take this."

Sorata shoved it at Nanami.

"But..."

"No buts."

The person waiting in line before them got on a taxi, while at the same time another taxi was approaching them.

"If..."

"No ifs."

The door leading to the passenger seat of the taxicab opened. Sorata forcefully shoved the still-hesitating Nanami inside.

"Won't this cost a lot?"

"Haven't you been working hard for two whole years!?"

"!"

Nanami's body trembled slightly, and she noticed the steel within Sorata's gaze.

She slowly but determinedly nodded her head.

“Also, just in case it isn’t enough, take this as well.”

He passed his own wallet to Nanami. This time she accepted it without a word.

“Driver, I’m begging you, please let her reach there in time.”

From the rear-view mirror, Sorata could see the driver’s shocked expression. However, maybe because he had sensed the solemness and sincerity within Sorata’s words, he nodded.

“Aoyama, do the best you can.”

The door of the taxicab closed. There was no time to continue their conversation.

She rolled down the window.

“Thanks a lot, Kanda-san. I can’t thank you enough.”

Sorata gestured to the driver, indicating that he should leave.

Even as the cab drew further and further away, Nanami kept repeating the words “thank you” by the window, although no one was there to listen.

Sorata didn’t say anything in the wake of her departure either, but in his heart he was wishing her the best of luck.

He hoped that she could accomplish the goal she had been holding for over two years, and that she could fulfill her dreams.

Although he could no longer see the cab, Sorata remained standing in the same spot for quite a while.

Suddenly, a message began playing from the intercom speakers located at the station.

- We are yet unsure of when train services will resume. We apologize for any inconveniences caused.

Sorata half-listened to this message while walking back to the bicycle he had parked outside the station, as his mind was drifting. Just as he inched it forward slightly, he remembered something important.

There was no time to relax.

- After school, I'll be waiting for you on the rooftop.

Mashiro was still waiting for him in school.

Sorata looked up at the long path before him, and slowly straddled himself onto the seat of the bicycle.

On the way back from the station, Sorata gave up attempting to scale the steep incline of the hill on the bike and began pushing it up instead. He then met up with Daichi who was waiting for him at the summit, after which Daichi sent them both back to school.

They parted ways at the school gates.

“Miyahara.”

Sorata called out his name just as he was about to leave.

“What is it now?”

“Thanks for your help.”

“I’m not doing this for you, I’m in it for Aoyama.”

"..."

"Anyway, I've already been dumped. See ya."

Daichi slowly pedaled away on his bike. After watching him leave, Sorata returned to the school blocks and made a mad dash for the art studio.

Since he was still in his indoor slippers, he ignored the shoe cabinets and rushed up the staircase leading there. However, as he arrived, there was no sign of Mashiro.

Neither was her bag nor her jacket.

"Where is that idiot..."

He suddenly recalled her message.

- After school, I'll be waiting for you on the rooftop.

"It can't be..."

He couldn't rule out the possibility that she may not have heard the message he left for her. Sorata suddenly realized that she might not even know how to access voice mails in the first place.

"That's the kind of person she is."

As he said this, he headed for the roof as fast as he could.

Sorata went up the steps leading there two by two, and as he finally reached the door that would lead him to the rooftop, he placed his hands on his knees to regain his breath. Since he was running pretty much the entire time after school had ended, the muscles in his legs had stiffened.

He breathed deeply then pulled open the metal door, where he was immediately struck by a gust of bone-chilling wind. He grumbled to himself about the cold and squeezed his shoulders together in an attempt to keep warm.

The rooftop was completely empty.

There was nothing on the rooftop to obstruct one's vision, so one could get an extremely good view of the entire city from there. The approaching night sky was clear without a sign of any clouds, and the winter constellations were slightly visible as well.

As he looked again, he noticed Mashiro's presence. She was sitting on the bench furthest away from him, and her jacket, even her scarf and gloves were all too familiar to Sorata.

He slowly approached Mashiro.

"Shiina."

He called out the name that he had called out countless times before.

Mashiro raised her head up and stared directly at Sorata, expressionless as always. There was no way to tell what she may have been thinking at the time.

"Sorry I'm late."

"..."

"The train that Aoyama was on had its service aborted, so I had to go get a taxi to fetch her."

"Sorata's breaking his promises already."

"That's why i apologized."

“That’s not it.”

Sorata furrowed his brow, not understanding the meaning behind what she had just said.

“Call me by my first name since we’re alone.”

“Oh, right...Mashiro. Is that fine with you?”

Since she hadn’t mentioned that matter in a long while, Sorata had forgotten about it as well.

“Speaking of which, didn’t you get my message? I told you that it’s cold, so wait for me in the classroom.”

“I got it.”

“Then why are you still here?”

“It’s better here.’

“Is it?”

He still couldn’t understand Mashiro.

Mashiro ignored Sorata and stood up from the bench she was sitting on, then pulled out a small box from her backpack.

She passed it to Sorata and said:

“Here, for you.”

What Sorata received was an unopened snack container. Inside were bamboo shoot-shaped snacks.

He attempted to calm down to analyze the situation. It didn’t need analyzing, as there was only one possible explanation for this.

“This, could it be...”

“Valentine’s Day is a day for chocolates.”

“Is this for me?”

“I just said so.”

“Oh...oh. Thanks.”

Since he was somewhat anticipating something like this would happen since earlier, he was considerably happy.

“So you were waiting for me here all this time just so you could give me this?”

“Yeah.”

“It would be fine even if you were to give it to me after we head back.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“Why’s that so?”

“Because I want to do uit this way.”

“Oh...”

“Because I want to try doing what a normal person would.”

“...”

“Many people give each other chocolates on rooftops.”

“I-is that so?”

“It happens in manga too.”

This time she pulled out a manga from her bag and opened up one of the pages for Sorata to see. In it, a couple was exchanging

chocolates on a rooftop, and faint lines were drawn around them, signifying an embarrassing atmosphere.

Previously Mashiro had said she was learning from shoujo manga, so she was referring to that all along. It wasn't for her to learn how to become a better manga artist, it was for her to learn how to be like a normal...to learn how to live like a normal Japanese high school student.

"But, why would you want to do something like this all of a sudden?"

"Don't just dismiss it as something like this."

"..."

"That's because I'm not a normal person."

Mashiro's tone didn't carry any hints of lament, and her expression was perfectly normal. She was just speaking the truth blandly, which made Sorata's chest tighten.

"You..."

"That's why, I don't understand Sorata recently."

"Huh? Me?"

"Sorata's distant."

"What's that supposed to..."

Sorata should have been the one feeling that way. He was always chasing behind Mashiro, always in her shadows, and he could never catch up.

"Why are you the one saying these things?"

“Sorata went to Nanami again today.”

“But of course? Today is an extremely important day for her! You should know that too, right?”

For some reason he felt as if his line had been crossed, and his voice instinctively rose.

“I know.”

“So...”

“But, today’s an important day for me too.”

“...”

“I was waiting for this day to come for a long time.”

“...”

Because he couldn’t tell, he didn’t notice it either. The bamboo short-shaped chocolates too, when did Mashiro buy them? Just thinking of the effort Mashiro had put in behind his back just for today made Sorata simultaneously happy and embarrassed, but at the same time he felt dangerous emotions surfacing and engulfing him, sinking his mind into utter chaos.

“Sorata.”

“W-what is it now?”

“How long is always?”

“Huh?”

“You said it before. You said you’ll always be watching me...how long is that?”

“...”

“After graduation day, Misaki and Jin won’t be around any longer, right?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Neither the speed of his thinking nor the depths of his emotions could catch up to Mashiro’s. Although all of them were together pretty much every single day, he had yet to consider what would happen after the third-years graduated. Sorata never noticed this change in Mashiro, as he never thought she would think about this sort of things.

“So, what about Sorata?”

“...”

“How long will Sorata be beside me?”

Sorata had no way to reply. Mere verbal promises held absolutely no meaning. One look into Mashiro’s eyes told him that that wasn’t the type of answer she was looking for.

“Sorata gets along well with Yuuko.”

“That’s because she’s my sister.”

“Then, what about Nanami?”

“...”

“Sorata’s gentle towards Nanami.”

“I’m not just gentle towards her alone, am I?”

“But, you would never say something like that to me.”

“Something like what?”

“Sorata wouldn’t tell me something like ‘Let’s work hard together’.”

"..."

She was probably referring to the time when they had returned to Fukuoka. Sorata had said something similar to Nanami. But, that was because the both of them had goals to work towards, with Sorata's being his game proposal and Nanami's being her auditions.

It wouldn't be something he would say to Mashiro, who was far ahead of him, so of course he would never do that.

"That's why, Sorata's distant."

"..."

Somehow, Sorata felt that this was all a misunderstanding. Mashiro was so far ahead of him that he couldn't even see her shadow. However, this so-called blind spot was not merely applicable to him alone, but to Mashiro as well, as she wouldn't be able to see his shadow either if she were to turn around. That was for certain. That was because the both of them were equidistant from each other...but Sorata had never realized this. The reason why sometimes he noticed that Mashiro seemed especially lonely was probably because of this as well.

"Sorata is my Sorata, am I wrong?"

"..."

Mashiro's uneasiness appeared to transmit to him at a bodily level. Both her eyes were lit up, and it was the first time he saw her looking this way.

It was because of this, that Mashiro herself didn't know how to deal with the situation, that was why she attempted to find Rita to discuss the matter, and read shoujo manga to learn how to be

normal, all for the sake of Valentine's Day. This was for the thing she needed to do together with Sorata...after much pondering, Mashiro reached a conclusion, that all she wanted to do was to reduce the distance between them...

Although he still couldn't understand everything that was going on, he did understand what she was going through.

"I'm sorry, but...I don't know."

If only he could take the easy way out and make casual promises he couldn't keep. However, he just couldn't do it.

"I see."

Mashiro's gaze fell.

"But, even if it's just for another day, I want to remain beside you."

All he could do was to talk face-to-face with her just like this, clumsily yet honestly. He could only continue to work hard, until the day where he could successfully materialize the emotions forming within his heart.

Now, he was already at his limit.

No, there was one more thing he could say.

"Also..."

"What is it?"

"Actually, I too...have been waiting for this day to come."

"Sorata?"

"I was thinking maybe I would receive some chocolates."

From Mashiro, of course.

“Since I received your text message this morning...I couldn’t wait for school to end.”

Sorata was so embarrassed that he felt his face might explode at any moment.

“I couldn’t even concentrate in class, that’s how much I was waiting for this moment to come.”

He couldn’t look Mashiro directly in the eye.

“Really?”

“I-I’m serious.”

“Are you satisfied that I gave you chocolates?”

“Of course, I side with the bamboo shoots after all.”

“That’s great...”

Mashiro’s expression finally relaxed, and she smiled gently. Of course, to Sorata, that was the cutest he had ever seen Mashiro at. After which, the feelings he had for her that he had sealed away since Christmas Night poured out in a gigantic burst. He wanted to hold her tight, to let her know his feelings, to make her happy.

In order to hide his emotions from her, he quickly said:

“It’ll be a pain if any of us were to get a cold, let’s head back.”

Without waiting for Mashiro’s reply, he prepared to head back to Sakurasou. If he were to remain alone with her for much longer, he didn’t know what might happen.

“Sorata.”

Mashiro immediately stopped him in his tracks.

“What is it?”

He asked.

“Promise me first that you won’t decline.”

“That depends on what you’re proposing.”

“...”

Mashiro’s gaze dropped once again somewhat sadly.

“Fine, I get it. I won’t refuse, so go on.”

He wouldn’t be able to take it if she were to remain this miserable.

“I wish to request something from you.”

“Your wish is my command.”

“Can I hold your hand?”

Mashiro approached him and looked up at him somewhat uneasily.

“Don’t you usually do it without asking anyway?”

“So what’s your reply?”

“Since it’s you, I guess I can’t refuse.”

Their conversation echoed about the otherwise empty rooftop, which made Sorata feel ridiculously embarrassed. He couldn’t take it, so he shifted his glance.

“Answer me properly.”

Mashiro looked away as well. Faced with her adorable attitude, Sorata’s restraint finally reached its limits.

“F-fine...you can hold my hand.”

The corners of her eyes drooped slightly in relief.

Mashiro's hand clasped tightly onto Sorata's. Mashiro had already taken her gloves off, to his surprise. Sorata lightly felt her sleek, petite fingers.

"..."

"..."

The both of them wordlessly began their journey back to Sakurasou while in this state.

He had held Mashiro's hand before. But, whenever he did it was always in more chaotic situations, and not in situations of peace and quiet which they had now. Despite his efforts to think of something to initiate a conversation between them, his brain just couldn't think properly. Mashiro looked down silently as well throughout the journey.

Just as Sorata figured his body wouldn't be able to take it any longer if this situation were to continue, Mashiro let go of his hand at the stairwell. Even though they had barely walked ten meters.

"Mashiro?"

"Forget it."

"Now what's this for?"

"Because I just can't keep calm."

As she said this, she folded her arms on her chest.

"My heart's pounding non-stop."

"That's because you're alive."

“What about you, Sorata?”

“Mine’s beating much harder than yours for sure!”

He couldn’t help but raise his voice.

“F-fine, since it’s so cold outside, let’s head home already.”

Unlike earlier, this time Sorata was the first to offer his left hand to her. After which, Mashiro considered this briefly and placed her right hand over it.

“...”

“...”

Silence engulfed the two once again. But, this time they didn’t let go.

Throughout the entire ten-minute-or-so journey back to Sakurasou, the two of them still didn’t utter a single word between them. The both of them repressed their urges to let go of each other’s hands due to the embarrassment, while at the same time briskly walking towards their destination. It was a precious moment for both of them.

That was because it was the first time Sorata truly felt that he shared the same air, the same space and the same atmosphere as Mashiro...

The two of them stopped right outside Sakurasou.

The two of them were holding hands.

“Sorata, we’re home.”

“Ah, I see. Right.”

They couldn't possibly walk inside in that state. Just as they were considering this dilemma, they heard rapid footfalls coming towards them.

"What's going on?"

While the both of them looked at each other in confusion, the front door opened with a sharp screeching noise, and Ryuunosuke dashed right out of it as if he were running for his life. Sorata hurriedly let go of Mashiro's hand.

As Ryuunosuke noticed Sorata's presence, he immediately circled behind him. After which he curled up his body, like prey trying to hide itself from its predator.

"I'd never thought Akasaka would end up in this state."

In order to alleviate the shock within his heart, Sorata said so to Ryuunosuke.

His usual calm, detached demeanor was completely absent.

"As for what's going on, I'll explain later. Now's not the time to be talking about such things. Kanda, stop that woman already!"

Ryuunosuke managed to rattle all that out in a single breath, and he stretched an arm out from behind Sorata and pointed towards the doorway.

"Huh?"

Sorata, who had yet to grasp the details of the situation, heard a familiar voice.

"What do you mean, that woman...could you please not address me in such an alien manner?"

The person who stepped out of the doorway was a golden-haired, beautiful young lady with mesmerizing eyes. Sorata could still remember her adultlike smile.

“Rita.”

Mashiro who was standing beside him approached Rita as if she were attracted to her. The both of them exchanged a light embrace.

“Mashiro, are you doing alright.”

“Yep.”

“You too, Sorata, it’s been a while.”

“Huh, Rita?”

“Isn’t your reaction a little delayed?”

“N-no, but, what! What’re you doing here?”

Under these circumstances, being surprised would be normal.

“Asking such meaningless questions, huh, Sorata? Nothing less than to be expected of you.”

“I-I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“What day is it today?”

As Rita said this, she pulled out a small box wrapped with red wrapping paper - it even had a matching ribbon tied upon it.

“Valentine’s Day.”

“Correct answer. Sorata, haven’t you too received chocolates from a cute girl?”

Rita looked back and forth between Sorata and Mashiro, and she gazed at them understandingly.

“I have the right to remain silent.”

“Aren’t you happy?”

“I’m remaining silent!”

“Fine, if you want to keep that a memory between the two of you alone, I won’t stop you. Anyway, it’s time for me to express my love.”

Rita smiled. She was undoubtedly referring to Ryuunosuke who was currently hiding behind Sorata. However, he was already on guard. It was probably because of that kiss on the cheek he had received from Rita a while back, which left a deep emotional scar on him.

Although Ryuunosuke may look like a girl on the outside, he actually hates females with a passion, and he would get goosebumps if a girl were to so much as get close to him. If they were to get even closer he would begin to exhibit allergy-like symptoms, and if they were to in contact he would faint.

From what Sorata knew, there was only one person who had actually successfully made Ryuunosuke faint, and she was the blonde-haired beauty standing before him, Rita.

“That’s the situation, Sorata, so if you don’t want a fierce kick to the face, hand Ryuunosuke over immediately.”

“Kanda, you’re on my side, aren’t you?”

“...”

How should he handle this situation? He could somewhat understand how Rita felt, having taken a twenty-hour flight all the way here just to hand Ryuunosuke a box of chocolates. But, since Ryuunosuke hated females to the very core of his being, he figured there wasn't really a proper way to go about it.

"What does Ryuunosuke not like about me?"

"Everything."

"If a normal person were being chased after this viciously by someone as beautiful as me, I'm sure they would be crying with joy by now."

Rita said something truly frightening. Although it was true, so he couldn't deny it.

"Nonsense! What kind of man would be happy after someone pried open his door with a crowbar-like thing?"

"What the hell! Are you kidding me?"

"I bet you were trying to launch a sneak attack on me while I was asleep, then force responsibility on me after you violate me."

"I'm sure things wouldn't go that far."

"Oh, the cat's out of the bag now?"

Rita calmly confessed. No one could keep up with her train of thoughts at this point.

"Also, just to clarify, it's not a crowbar-like thing, it IS a crowbar. I knew you would never open the door for me obediently, so I came prepared."

Sorata was left speechless. He genuinely hoped that the both of them could settle things personally.

“Let’s not talk about this first, Ryuunosuke, what exactly do you not like about me?”

“I just told you a minute ago, everything.”

“I’m pretty confident that my figure is more than enough to satisfy any man.”

Rita said while crossing her arms over her chest, accentuating her cleavage. Sorata’s gaze naturally was led there as well.

“Sorata, where are you looking at?”

Mashiro glared at him unhappily.

“I’m always looking ahead.”

“Anyway, just take the chocolates.”

“I already said that I won’t. If I accept a request from you now, who knows what you might ask from me in the future.”

“Please don’t speak of me as if I’m a terrorist.”

“But you are.”

“...”

Rita looked down in a somewhat lonely fashion. Girls can really make others feel guilty when they do that.

“If I were to do that, this woman will definitely ask for some ridiculous gift from me in return next month.”

“After I said that I already have a guy I’m interested in, my parents told me that I have to bring you back to see them no matter what.”

Rita casually said something frightening yet again. Ryuunosuke's judgment may have been correct.

"Now you know, Kanda, these are the methods women use. Especially this one, ones like her that have absolute confidence in themselves are the worst. All of them think that all males in the world will definitely bow to their command, they're the most dastardly creatures in the entire universe. Dammit, now you've made me remember something unpleasant..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"..."

Ryuunosuke suddenly chose to remain silent, apparently having said too much.

"Sigh...since you hate this too much, I won't force it open you. Since you won't have it, this thing has no meaning."

Rita imitated the motion of a pitcher right before throwing a ball, and she acted as if she was going to throw the box of chocolates onto the road.

"Ah, wait just a second!"

Sorata stopped her at the very last moment.

"Akasaka, just take it."

"So you're telling me to go to England next month? You must be joking."

"Rita, you just need him to take this right? It doesn't matter even if he doesn't follow you to England, right?"

“Fine. If he’s willing to accept it, but wait, it’ll be better if he could eat it right here and now.”

“I just need to eat it?”

Ryuunosuke pondered this briefly.

“Fine, I don’t want to waste any more time anyway. The motion control software doesn’t run itself, you know.”

Sorata sighed in relief. Now things should be fine.

“Oi, woman.”

“Call me Rita.”

“If I take the chocolates and eat them here, you’d better keep your promise about next month. Ya understand?”

“Fine, I get it. Now, please take this.”

Ryuunosuke nervously took the box of chocolates from Rita’s outstretched hand. Sorata felt his nervous, ragged breath on his back.

The delivery was successful. Ryuunosuke immediately ripped open the packaging and began snatching out the pieces of chocolate from the box. Each piece of chocolate had patterns drawn with white chocolate upon them. They were all portraits of Rita, with the subtitle “Please eat me” written underneath. Ryuunosuke appeared extremely unhappy about this. It was probably because of that that Rita requested he eat them in front of her. She thinks of everything.

Since his aim was to finish off the chocolates as fast as he could, he began wolfing and gulping the chocolates down as fast as he could,

with Sorata being an unwilling spectator. Finally, he got to the last one and promptly shoved it into his mouth.

He said while chewing:

“Now it should be fine.”

He then began walking back into Sakurasou.

“Ah, please wait.”

As they passed by each other, Rita called out to him.

“I’ve already finished my part.”

Stopping to listen to her was Ryuunosuke’s mistake. Rita turned around and faced him, then swiftly wrapped her arms around his neck, leaving the both of them so close to each other that their faces were almost touching.

“--!”

It happened so fast that he was unable to scream.

“Ah!”

Sorata cried out in his place.

That was because Ryuunosuke’s mouth had been tightly sealed shut by Rita’s lips.

“...”

It lasted for a full five seconds. At long last, Rita let go of Ryuunosuke, and stuck out her tongue to lick her lips, On her face was an absolutely bewitching and seductive expression.

“Since you said you won’t do it next month, I guess I’ll take this parting gift from you in advance.”

Rita smiled at a job well done, while Ryuunosuke fell backwards, having completely lost consciousness.

“Ah-! Akasaka!”

“That was my first kiss, so please take responsibility for it.”

“He can’t hear you!”

“Then tell him that when he wakes up.”

She smiled devilishly despite possessing the cute looks of an angel, to think that she could manipulate Ryuunosuke so easily...

Sorata carried Ryuunosuke’s body on his back.

He couldn’t let him sleep outside in the winter cold.

“So, what are your plans for now, Rita?”

“I’m going to stay overnight in Mashiro’s room, then I’m heading back tomorrow.”

“You really came just for the sake of giving him chocolates, huh.”

“I seem to be the type to go head-over-heels in pursuit of love.”

She must be an exceptionally impulsive person to come all the way from England just to deliver a box of chocolates. But to Ryuunosuke, she was nothing but bad news.

Sorata followed Rita and Mashiro back into Sakurasou.

Soon after they had entered, the door opened once again.

“I’m back...”

That voice contained absolutely no energy. Its owner was Misaki, and she merely took off her shoes and trudged over to the staircase leading up to the second floor without noticing Rita at all.

“Misaki, what is it?”

Misaki stopped in her tracks at this query.

“Oh, Rita, it’s you...”

It seemed that she had just noticed her presence.

“Welcome...”

Her response was beyond slow.

There could only be one reason behind Misaki’s low spirits.

“You didn’t manage to pass it to Jin-senpai?”

“Yeah...”

Misaki’s gaze slid down once again, while Rita appeared confused, not knowing the details of the situation.

Her tears dripped onto the floor of the corridor.

Misaki pulled out the chocolates she had made from her bag, and before Sorata could stop her, she had already forcefully ripped open the packaging and began shoving them down her throat herself. A wave of unpleasant emotions corroded his body as he remembered the time and effort Misaki had put it to those things for Jin’s sake.

“Misaki-senpai...”

“Kouhai-kun, the chocolates are salty...”

“...”

“I don’t think I can go on any longer...”

“How could this be...”

Sorata couldn’t bring himself to irresponsibly deny her statement.

“I don’t know how to approach Jin any more...”

Misaki crouched down at the corner of the stairwell.

“I’m scared, I’m really scared, no matter what Jin might say, I’ll still be scared...”

She began crying, muffling the sounds of her sobs by burying her face in her knees.

Just as Sorata was about to comfort her, he felt his phone ringing in his pocket, signifying that he had a call.

He proceeded to his own room while going over the possibilities of whoever may be calling at the time. Kazuki’s name was displayed on the screen, therefore he couldn’t possibly reject the call. Despite what Misaki was going through right behind him, Sorata still picked up the phone.

“Hello, Kanda here.”

“Hello, Kazuki here.”

“Thank you for calling.”

“Am I catching you at a bad time? This won’t take long,”

“Oh, OK.”

Even though Kazuki was on the other end of the conversation, Sorata still found it hard to concentrate. However, as he heard what he had to say next, he couldn’t hide his surprise.

“The judging date for your project, titled<Rhythm Battler>, has been confirmed.”

“Huh?”

“It’s March the 7th, a Monday.”

“A-Alright.”

“Let’s find time to discuss again next week.”

“Understood.”

“I’m only calling you now to tell you this, so the actual schedule on the day itself can be arranged later.”

“Right.”

“Then let’s leave it at that.” Kazuki hung up. Sorata double-checked this before putting his phone back in his pocket, and he sighed deeply. The day that would decide his fate was approaching.

- March the 7th?

Of all days. The next day, the 8th would be graduation day.

When he turned around, he noticed Misaki was still crouching by the stairs, with Rita and Mashiro staring at her concernedly.

Half of the month of February had already passed, and he could feel the footsteps of graduation approaching him slowly but surely. There were only less than three weeks until graduation. Sorata felt an intense pain, as it was the first time that he had realized the actual magnitude of the situation.

Could Misaki and Jin really go on this way?

“...”

Of course not...

Chapter 5

It’s Too Early To Be Called A Memory

Today, Sorata woke up and looked at the clock only to see that it was five past eight in the morning.

Normally if he were to wake up at this time, he would be rushing to get ready for school, but since it was a weekend, he figured it wouldn't be a bad idea to crawl back under his blanket and go back to sleep a while longer.

Despite this, Sorata managed to repress the urge to do so. Although the weather outside was incredibly cold, he mustered his willpower and got up.

The seven cats that were in the blanket with him began meowing and growling.

"Fine fine fine, I get it."

After he placed the blanket over the cats once more, he trudged out of his room while shivering.

Even though it was a Saturday, Sorata had an errand to run. Six days had passed since Valentine's Day, which means it was the twentieth of February, the day when Suiko High would be releasing its entrance examination results.

As much as he was unwilling to do so, he had to go and confirm Yuuko's results.

On the way to the dining room, he bumped into Chihiro. She had multiple layers of makeup on, and she wore a fairly thick coat on top of her casual clothing.

“Sensei, do you have to work again today?”

“I have a meeting that I don’t wish to attend.”

Chihiro said while wearing her shoes, with an annoyed expression on her face.

“Sorry for your loss.”

“I know right.”

After this brief conversation, Chihiro headed off.

Sorata mumbled to himself as soon as she left:

“I wonder if Sensei’s alright.”

Normally, Chihiro would say something arrogant or downright unreasonable if she were to bump into Sorata, but today she seemed...normal.

“Oh well, I suppose it’s better than getting scolded for no reason.”

Just as he said this, his cat, Hikari came over and began rubbing itself against his leg. The other six came dashing out as well. Although the cold was unbearable, he supposed they preferred braving it over staying hungry.

He yawned as he stepped into the dining room and began preparing some cat food. The cats immediately surrounded him in anticipation.

He began eating breakfast leisurely while watching the cats. Although he still yawned here and there, his thoughts were utterly clear. Setting aside the judgment of his proposal on the 7th, he began thinking of Misaki and Jin.

It was like that since Valentine's night.

Maybe because he was influenced by Rita who would be returning to England the very next day -

"Now we can only rely on Sorata to bring them both back together."

"Why me?"

"Because you're always trying so hard to do something for their sakes."

Sorata couldn't deny this. Just as Rita had said -

He wanted to do something for them. For the two people that had always been together since he had arrived at Sakurasou. Although he was always being harassed by the alien Misaki, and constantly being on the receiving end of Jin's rough personality, he still felt that that it was exactly because of those two that he could have exhilarating, exciting, days; days where he could feel overjoyed, enraged, downright exhausted. Thus, he felt all the suffering he had gone through because of them was worth it.

He had begun to realize this little by little, just as graduation was approaching.

One of his cats climbed onto his knee as he was in the midst of this thoughts.

Sorata snapped out of his musings and looked at the clock only to realize that it was already past eight thirty.

The results would be publicly released at nine.

“I’ll be waiting right at the phone for the news, so you’d better not be late, Nii-chan!”

Yuuko had insisted this, so he couldn’t be late for it at any cost.

Sorata left his cats behind to their breakfast and returned to his room to change his clothes. After putting on a coat over his usual uniform, he walked towards the front door. Just as he was wearing his shoes, he heard Nanami, who was just coming down from the second floor, call out to him:

“Hmm, are you going out somewhere?”

“Yuuko’s results.”

“Oh, right, it’s today.”

“Yep.”

Nanami paused slightly to think, then asked:

“Can I come along?”

“I’m fine with that, but don’t you have some training courses to attend?”

He remembered Nanami mentioning that she would have a lot of lessons in February, so she would be busy.

“My auditions were on Monday, remember? They’re giving me a day off because of that so I can rest up.”

“What about work?”

“I’ll get told off by you again if I don’t make sure I get a good rest.”

“It’s not like I’m your mom or anything.”

“Well, it sure seems like it...ah, just let me go changed, I’ll be right there.”

“Right.”

Nanami promptly dashed upstairs, Sorata’s reply drifting up after her.

It took a whole fifteen minutes before Nanami returned from the second floor. Sorata initially thought that it was perhaps because girls had a lot more things to prepare, until he saw Mashiro, who was also in uniform, following behind her.

“What’s with the sudden increase in numbers?”

“Mashiro said she wanted to come.”

Nanami appeared somewhat uncomfortable.

“Is that so?”

Sorata directed the question towards Mashiro this time.

“Yuuko’s results are important.”

“What about them?”

“My plans for the future may change.”

“...So what happens if she passes?”

“I’ll start to get serious.”

“Hmm, don’t tell me you’re going to transform and turn a new leaf?”

“I won’t.”

“...Actually, you replying like that with that much conviction isn’t making me feel any better.”

“Kanda-san, I know I was the one who asked you to wait for me, but shouldn’t we get going by now?”

Sorata had initially more than enough time to spare before he got there, but after all the delays he suddenly found himself rushed for time.

He called out “We’re heading out” to no one in particular and exited Sakurasou.

In their small party of three, Sorata walked in the middle, with Mashiro and Nanami on either side of him. The atmosphere around them seemed impossibly different, as it carried equal hints of relaxedness and leisureliness, presumably because the holidays had just begun.

Mashiro, who was walking to the right of Sorata, soon began reading her shoujo manga as usual, causing her gait to become unstable. Sorata quickly grabbed onto her arm and shoulder, effectively stabilizing her, and they continued on in this fashion. Since this was pretty much a commonplace happening for them since the third term of school, Sorata was pretty much used to it.

Nanami who was standing on the left of him didn’t utter a single word, even when they passed by a small playground. She had her head bent low, and she was breathing deeply, clutching tightly onto her backpack.

“I think I did the best I could. It was all thanks to Kanda-san.”

Nanami had told him that the very next day after her auditions. He assumed that she was acting in this fashion since she was still nervous about her results. Speaking of those, he remembered her mentioning this:

"If I remember correctly, they usually release the results between late February and early March."

Thus, there was no use in them thinking about it this much since there was so much time until the results were actually released. He wanted to know, but at the same time he felt that finding out would be equally horrifying as not knowing. He could tell that Nanami felt the same way as well.

"Hey, Aoyama."

Sorata called out to her while they were waiting for a traffic light to turn green. He felt the need to break the silence between them in order to relieve the tense situation somewhat...

Her reply was rather shocking.

"Huh? W-what?! What...what is it!?"

He couldn't help but wonder what was going on, since she had reacted this violently just by having her name called out.

"That's what I should be asking you, is something wrong?"

"I-It's fine."

The nervousness Nanami seemed to be experiencing at this moment was noticeably different from the nervousness she exhibited right before her auditions, however.

She couldn't be thinking about Yuuko's results as well, could she?

“If you’re worried about Yuuko’s examination results, she definitely won’t pass, so just forget about it.”

“T-That’s not it.”

It didn’t seem to be the case, effectively making matters more confusing.

They proceeded forward once again as the traffic lights turned green. Nanami, who had reacted slightly slower to this than the other two of them, jogged briefly in order to catch up.

“K-Kanda-san.”

Nanami called out to Sorata in a sharp voice. Her cheeks were red, and she averted her gaze towards one of the electrical poles in the distance.

Sorata felt nervous as well due to this development.

“W-what is it all of a sudden?”

Nanami continued to look away despite Sorata’s reply.

“Um, would you be willing to accept this?”

Nanami stretched out a hand that was holding tightly onto something. It was a tiny package, wrapped with beautiful sky-blue colored wrapping paper.

“A-actually, on the fourteenth...when I was on the way back from my auditions, I happened to pass by this store that sold chocolates and stuff, so, I thought...since you’ve been taking care of me all this while, what with helping me with cleaning duties and other things, you know, um, just take this as a sort of thank-you gift...”

She spoke so fast that she began to stutter. Even though she had reverted to her native Kansai accent as she did so, her voice didn't carry any hints of confidence. The back of her neck was completely red with embarrassment.

"Ah, oh."

Sorata's heart began pounding wildly as well, and he couldn't look Nanami in the eye.

"I know it's a week late, but...didn't all that stuff happen with Kamiigusa-senpai on that day? I felt awkward because of that so, I didn't give it to you..."

"I-I see."

Sorata replied, merely going with the flow of the conversation as he was still confused.

"It would be a waste to throw it away too, and I'd feel weird if I were to eat them myself, so...please take this!"

"Oh, um, thanks."

As he took the package from Nanami, he saw that her hands were trembling slightly.

"T-This isn't a Valentine's Day gift or anything."

"Hmm?"

"I-It's a thank-you gift, didn't...didn't i just say that?"

"I-I see."

Coming back to the point, why was the situation so awkward? He couldn't take it any longer.

"..."

"..."

The situation only grew increasingly more awkward as the two fell silent. The atmosphere between Nanami and Sorata seemed to be coercing either one of them to just say something in order to break this silence.

Sorata wanted to ignore it, but in doing so he realized he hed began to notice it even more. As he looked over at Nanami's embarrassed expression, he remembered what happened on that day...the day Nanami had had her auditions, what Miyahara Daichi had said. No, to be precise, the words had always been tormenting him for the longest time, it was just that he had chosen not to acknowledge them.

'''- Since you're so gentle towards her, you should just tell her how you feel!'''

Sorata understood Daichi's words very well. He did understand them, but how should he deal with this situation? They didn't teach these things in school. He began to wish they did, instead of boring old fractions and decimals.

The awkwardness of the situation only increased over time.

The person who threw the first stone to salvage the situation was, surprisingly, Mashiro.

"Sorata and Nanami's faces are red, are you guys sick?"

"No!"

"Definitely not!"

The both of them replied in the exact same instant, instead making them feel even more awkward.

“Sorata, that.”

Mashiro directed her gaze towards the package Sorata was holding.

“Aoyama gave it to me.”

He planned to say it casually, but for some reason his tone became coarse instead.

“...”

Mashiro remained silent, and instead began staring at Sorata.

“W-What is it?”

“Sorata seems happy.”

“I-Is there something wrong with that?”

“Even happier than the time I gave you some.”

“I-Is that so?”

Nanami seemed to be mumbling something behind him. However, Sorata was already too exhausted to reply.

“I-It’s the same! I’m equally happy! Jeez, Shiina, what are you saying...s-stop that!”

“...”

Mashiro ended up looking even more unhappy.

“Whatever.”

Her expression betrayed her words.

“Since it doesn’t matter to you, could you stop looking so unhappy already?”

“Do I look unhappy to you?”

“Of course.”

“I’m actually angry.”

“That’s even worse!”

“Also, I’m serious.”

“Which means it matters to you after all, then!”

“Sorata’s treating Nanami specially again.”

“I am NOT! Also, why do I have to defend myself like this...”

“I wonder?”

Nanami replied to Sorata’s mumblings, and their eyes met in the process.

“...”

“...”

The both of them looked away hurriedly.

“Now you’re getting along so well with Nanami again.”

“I just said I’m not!”

“Of course not!”

“See, you guys get along so well.”

This squabbling continued on until they reached school.

The closer they got to the school gates, the more the atmosphere around them seemed to grow different from, say, that of a normal holiday, or even a normal school day. Examinees in uniforms of various schools were all moving towards the school, all appearing equally nervous. The situation was tense, and everyone's smiles carried hints of nervousness. Sorata even saw the occasional student who would close his or her eyes briefly as if in prayer.

Sorata recalled that he had experienced similar feelings two years ago, when he was in the very same situation, but he couldn't recall it clearly. All he could remember was the number written on his examination slip, and the very same number being displayed on the results board.

The three of them blended into the crowds and managed to enter the school grounds. The schoolyard that they knew so well felt like a different place entirely for that day only, as the atmosphere was strikingly different.

The entrance was already crowded with hordes of people, and the billboard where the results would be displayed on was already prepared. However, it was covered with a black cloth for the time being, preventing them from getting a glance at the results.

"It's the first time I'm experiencing something like this, so I guess I feel kinda nervous as well."

"Really? Didn't you come down to get a look at your own results?"

"Nope. Since they would come in the mail the next day anyway, I didn't bother coming down here all the way from Osaka."

As the two of them were having this conversation, the two male teachers who were apparently in charge of this whole thing stepped out from within one of the school blocks, attracting everyone's attention.

"Um...since it's about time, we shall now display the serial numbers of the students who have successfully passed their exams."

The two teachers stepped over to either side of the billboard and pulled off the black cloth covering it ceremoniously. There was no countdown, no suspense nor hesitation.

There wasn't even enough time for them to prepare themselves mentally, as the numbers instantly jumped into their vision.

Immediately, cries of "I'm in!" could be heard. They could hear some students crying out with glee, but at the same time audible sobs could be heard coming from some unfortunate students. One of the girls standing in front of them collapsed instead, clutching her face as she did so.

Whether they would pass or fail - this is where their fates would be decided. It may be cruel, but that's the way competition works.

Within this swirling vortex of happiness and despair, Sorata stepped up to get what he came for. Yuuko's serial number was 99. He scanned through the board, skipping the 80s and getting to the 90s. 91, 92, 93, all of them had successfully passed. An occurrence like that could be classified as somewhat rare, considering the competitive nature of the examinations. This flawless record continued all the way until number 98. He then searched for the most important number, 99.

"..."

It wasn't there. After 98 came 100.

He began scanning the row once again from 90.

"..."

Still nothing.

Mashiro looked up at the billboard as well, while Nanami merely sighed disappointedly.

"Oh well, nothing we can do."

Sorata tried his best to sound as cheerful as he could, and he left the area with the other two girls. He needed to contact Yuuko.

He pulled out his phone from his pocket and swiftly keyed in his house phone number. The call went through halfway through its first ring. Yuuko must've been waiting in front of the phone after all.

"How was it, Nii-chan?"

"What a coincidence, I was just about to tell you."

"Did I get in?"

"Ah, nope...you failed."

There was no point in dragging the conversation. Sorata put it as frankly as he could.

"It's not nice to be joking around considering the matter at hand."

Yuuko's tone seemed to be saying "Oh, you."

"You really failed."

“There you go again.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Nii-chan’s good at lying. I bet you’re just trying to make me feel disappointed, then surprise me right?”

“You really failed. I’m telling you.”

“Jeez, Nii-chan, cut it!”

Things were getting troublesome.

“Right, I get it. There’ll be another confirmation coming in the mail tomorrow anyway, so you can see for yourself when the time comes.”

“...”

Yuuko inhaled sharply as she heard this.

“I-I really failed?! Now that’s an astonishing development!”

“Well, I kinda expected that.”

“Liar, go over there and look once again!”

“I’ve already double-checked it. Everyone in the 90 row managed to get in except you. It could have been a perfect finish.”

“That’s too much! Since it’s that way, couldn’t they have just let me pass for the heck of it? Why is it only me?”

“Probably because your results were bad.”

“You should at least say something nice to me considering how down I’m feeling now.”

“That’s unnecessary! Besides, you don’t sound down at all.”

“Of course I do! I’m really sad. When will I ever get to use this celebratory balloon with ‘Congratulations on passing your entrance exams’ on it!?”

”Who knows.”

The real question was, why did she have something like that in the first place?

“I stayed up three nights to make it.”

“There’s clearly something wrong with your priorities.”

“What now? Nii-chan, should I just throw it away then?”

“Don’t you still have the entrance exams for the government-run schools next month? Just wait until then.”

“Ah, right.”

She seemed to have finally accepted the truth.

“Right, since everything’s said and done, I’m hanging up.”

“Ah...no wait! The balloon doesn’t matter!”

“You were the one who mentioned it after all.”

“No, the exams! I’m talking about the exams! Did I really not get into Suiko?”

“Nope, you failed.”

“But I worked so hard for that!”

“Well, your competitors must’ve worked harder than you did.”

“Hmm? I see. Guess there’s nothing I can do, then.”

His sister may be an idiot, but she could be exceptionally understanding at times.

“But Yuuko just made a couple of wrong guesses for the answers.”

“Yep, now I’m more than convinced that you deserved to fail.”

He wanted to end the phone call. Sorata looked towards the school once again only to see two familiar figures near the entrance. It was the the previous student council president, Tatebayashi Souichiro and his girlfriend...Hauhau, also known as Himemiya Saori.

Why would they be there anyway?

The two were standing in front of the billboard where the entrance examination results for the music streams were displayed, as they were separated from the examination results for the other, normal streams.

Well, it was a good opportunity for Sorata to get information on Jin from them anyway. Thus, he felt an increasingly urgent need to get off the phone.

“Nii-chan, are you listening?”

“Yeah, I am, I am.”

He wasn’t.

“So because that’s why this.”

“Speak Japanese!”

“Send my regards to mom and dad. Thanks.”

Ignoring Yuuko who was still complaining on the other end, Sorata hung up the phone and stuffed it into his pocket.

“Is Yuuko alright?”

Nanami asked somewhat worriedly.

“Ah, she’s always been like this. She’s fallen down so many times over the years that she somehow learnt how to pick herself up as well, so it’s fine.”

“Hmm...you really do understand her after all.”

“That’s because she’s my sister. Anyway, look over there for a moment.”

Sorata directed his gaze towards the former student council president and Hauhau, Himemiya Saori’s direction.

“I’m going to ask about Jin-senpai.”

“We’ll go too.”

Nanami and Mashiro followed along behind him.

“Um...”

Sorata called out towards the former student council president’s rather tall frame.

Both he and Saori turned around and looked at Sorata.

“Kanda Sorata...I didn’t expect to be meeting you here.”

“My sister went to take the exams as well, so I’m just here to verify her results. It didn’t go so well.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Saori’s gaze instantly turned sympathetic.

“Ah, it’s fine, my sister’s never been all that good with academic stuff anyway, so I was kinda expecting this.”

“I see.”

“So, the both of you are here because?”

“My younger brother wants to study music here starting next year.”

“He must be good.”

Sorata and Saori both looked up at the billboard displaying the entrance examination results for the music stream. Although it was a yearly occurrence, it was still a shock to see how small an amount of students were accepted. There were only ten numbers on the board, as there were only ten applicable positions.

The competition for music streams were much, much higher than the normal streams, and as much as ten times more students would be rejected with regards to the music stream, sometimes reaching as high a rate as twenty times.

“Congratulations.”

Nanami who was standing beside Sorata said to Saori.

“Thank you.”

“Hau...no, since it’s Himemiya-senpai’s brother, he must be a really reliable student as well.”

“Ha, who knows.”

Saori smiled warmly. This topic of conversation was dropped.

“Sorata.”

Mashiro called out his name while grabbing onto his arm.

She seemed to be reminding him not to forget what he had came for. Maybe she, too, cared about Misaki in her own way.

“Um, President.”

“I’m the ‘’former’’ President.”

“Oh, sorry about that. I was just going to ask about Jin-senpai, is he doing alright?”

“Well, he gets to make trouble for me every day, so I suppose he’s enjoying his life as it is.”

The former student council president said grudgingly.

“My condolences.”

“Kanda-san, please bring Mitaka back to Sakurasou.”

Saori said, equally unhappily.

“With him around, I can’t go to Souichiro’s place to play any more.”

The former student council president’s face reddened slightly as this comment. He seemed to be trying to explain himself, but he couldn’t find the words to do so.

“Souichiro, is something wrong?”

“T-that...”

“I think it’s probably because you said something about not being able to go to the President’s room.”

“So what if I did...”

Saori suddenly began stuttering, as if she had just realized the implications behind what she just said.

“I-It’s not what you think it is. What I said just now wasn’t weird at all, I was just, um, you know, referring to...uh...let’s say if I wanted to cook something there, because Mitaka’s around, that guy’s surprisingly good with cooking and stuff, so I, er...no, what am I saying?”

“Um, the both of you are very close, so you feel that Jin-senpai is becoming a nuisance since he’s always around in the President’s room. I think I understand what’s happening here.”

“You understand wrong, then...although it’s not completely wrong. Anyway, I want to talk about Misaki. Is there anything I could do for her?”

As soon as the topic of conversation drifted over to Misaki, Saori furrowed her brow and began looking at them rather solemnly. It was obvious that she really cared about Misaki.

“Because the only person Misaki will settle for is Mitaka...”

Sorata could only agree with her on this. Kamiigusa Misaki would definitely want no one other than Jin...

“Anyway, Kanda, that’s not what you’re here for.”

The former student council president cleared his throat briefly.

“You want to ask about Mitaka’s whereabouts, don’t you. He’s currently in school.”

“Hmm?”

“The results of his own entrance examinations were released, so he’s currently reporting them to his teachers.”

As for whether or not he passed, it took Sorata one look at the former student council president's unhappy expression to tell.

"So he's going off to Osaka in April then."

This cold, hard truth began suffocating him. The normal Misaki would've probably brushed it off and said something like "It only takes three hours to Osaka on the Shinkansen" while smiling. However, she had yet to speak to him probably since Christmas night.

If they were to part under these circumstances, they definitely wouldn't have a future together. Either way, Sorata knew that he absolutely had to create an opportunity for the both of them to talk before Jin went off to Osaka, and before they all graduated.

"The 8th of March."

The former student council president suddenly blurted out this date. Sorata knew very well what day it was.

Graduation day.

"There's only two weeks left."

Saori mumbled sentimentally.

That was a signal to Sorata. It made him realize the urgency of the current situation, and his body instantly entered a state of panic. He couldn't wait any longer. As these thoughts crossed his mind, his heart began pounding, and the urge to up and run away to Jin's location immediately caused his body to ache.

"Aoyama."

“I understand. I’ll head back to Sakurasou to get Kamiigusa-senpai here.”

Nanami smiled mischievously at Sorata’s shocked expression.

“Don’t forget I’ve been in Sakurasou for half a year already.”

“I’ll leave it to you then.”

Nanami nodded and dashed towards the direction of the school gates. Sorata hurriedly dragged Mashiro towards the staff office without looking back.

Walking through the silent corridors of the school, Sorata and Mashiro finally reached the staff office. From the window placed on the door leading into it, they could see the teacher in charge of compiling the students' career choices, Takatsu-sensei talking to Jin.

"Since when did you two get the habit of peeking into the staff room?"

"Ah."

Sorata got a huge shock from the voice that suddenly came from behind them. It was Chihiro's voice.

"Oh, it's Mitaka."

Chihiro leaned in closer to Sorata to see what was going on. Their faces were almost touching.

"S-sensei."

"What is it, you charmed by the smell of an adult?"

"More like I'm choking on the smell of your powder."

His head got a light smack for that. "Ouch, I'm against violence."

Chihiro pretended not to notice and instead put her hands on the door.

After which she appeared to half-mumble to herself:

"Back on Christmas night Mitaka seemed to have had a revelation."

"Huh, what's that supposed to mean?"

Sorata's query, however, was rendered inaudible under the sound of the door opening.

"You can ask him what he has in his pocket."

Chihiro walked into the office, but not before leaving Sorata with more questions to ponder over. He couldn't head inside to question her either.

What did she mean by Jin's revelation? Also, the thing in his pocket...Sorata had no idea what was going on.

Although he knew it wouldn't do him any good to think too much about the matter, he still spent a good five minutes doing so. Soon after, Jin excused himself and exited the room.

Sorata immediately called out to stop him from leaving.

"Jin-senpai."

Having heard Sorata's voice, Jin shrugged his shoulders, seeming rather annoyed, and slowly turned around.

"What is it? What's with that scary-looking expression on your face?"

As if to slightly warm the atmosphere between the two, he quipped jokingly.

"Could I get you to come with me?"

Sorata's expression remained solemn.

"What a forbidden love."

"..."

"Right, I told you to quit it with that scary expression already. Hit me with your best shot."

Sorata brought Jin to the rooftop, where Mashiro closed the door behind the three of them.

Because the sun was shining much brighter than usual today, although the air around them was chillingly cold, they didn't feel it. The warmth of the sun's rays penetrated their jackets.

Jin placed his hands on the guardrail and looked down at the entrance to their school right below him. Sorata tried to imitate his actions, but sadly he couldn't tell what Jin was thinking. It was hard to read his thoughts when only the side of his face could be seen.

He may have been thinking of his own entrance exam three years ago. Back then, was Misaki with him too?

"Junior high students really are young."

It wasn't all that evident among the female students, but there were some baby-faced ones among the male student crowd.

"So, what did you bring me all the way up here for? It can't be because you want to confess your love to me."

"It's about Misaki-senpai."

"I figured as much."

"Do you know what she wrote on this New Year's Ema[17]?"

"Probably something about me being able to successfully get into the university I want."

Even though his guess was spot on, Sorata wasn't surprised in the slightest.

"I'm guessing she even bought me a good-luck charm."

Jin mumbled.

Sorata nodded silently. Jin did understand Misaki after all.

"She might have even got me some Valentine's chocolates."

"She did."

In the end, she didn't manage to deliver either of them.

"So, Sorata, what do you have to say?"

"Since you understand Misaki-senpai this well, I'm sure I don't need to tell you for you to know!"

"..."

Jin didn't reply. Ignoring the flustered Sorata, he sighed softly and leaned his back against the guardrail.

"How is that fellow doing now?"

He even dared to ask something like that.

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[17] Small wooden plaques where you write your wish on one.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_(Shinto)

"Jin-senpai!"

"She's making anime."

Mashiro replied instead.

"That's the Misaki I know, I'm sure she'll be able to forget me soon enough."

"Are you being serious?"

"Does that mean it wouldn't matter if I were joking?"

His irresponsible attitude pissed Sorata off. Sorata's emotions slowly began betraying his outwardly calm demeanor, and his anger began raging like hot coals over a fire.

Jin appeared to be taking enjoyment in this, and this all the more so rubbed salt in Sorata's wound, pushing him over the edge/

"How could it possibly not matter?"

Through his voice, it was evident that he was struggling to keep calm.

"Please talk this through with Misaki-senpai."

"Talk what through?"

"About..."

"I'm going to Osaka, so I can't be in a relationship with Misaki. She knows that very well too, so what more do I have to say?"

"..."

"You too, Sorata, do you have the time to be meddling in others' affairs like this?"

"My proposal's judgment is two weeks away, so I have all the time in the world."

"I see. You're doing fine, so you took it upon yourself to take care of me too. Hmm, I guess it ain't half bad to be as relaxed as you are."

Jin glared at Sorata provocatively.

"Jin-senpai, you're not like what you used to be at all!"

"And how did I use to be?"

"You're always cool, you're an all-rounder, you're mature, you're reliable, you're always willing to give me advice, when I feel down you're always the shoulder for me to cry on, you're always so attentive of everything that goes on in Sakurasou, but you never show it, and you always laugh it off...so, I don't care if you misinterpret this, but you've always been one of my role models!"

"That just means that you're terrible at picking role models then, just give up already."

"How could I just give up like that!"

"Don't take out your emotions on me!"

Jin reacted in response to Sorata's anger, and his eyes had a steely glint in them. So did Sorata's.

"Ah, that's right. Because if it's something Jin-senpai can't do, I definitely won't be able to do it either!"

He knew that some part of him was always searching for answers through Jin. He hoped that he would be able to see how Jin would overcome and react to this situation, with Misaki's emotions on the line. Jin himself had noticed this as well.

So, even despite being scolded like this, Sorata didn't feel even a tinge of shame. Setting all this aside for now, he genuinely hoped that Jin and Misaki could stay together. He had confidence in himself that these feelings were absolutely sincere.

"Like what you've just said, I do have a lot of expectations on you. But, that's not all. That's not the only reason why I'm not giving up! How do you think I could just give up on you and Misaki-senpai! What kind of joke is that!"

Sorata let his emotions take hold of him, and he grabbed Jin's sleeve, pressing his back hard onto the guardrail.

"Do you plan to head to Osaka just like that?"

"And what if I do?"

Sorata couldn't take any more of Jin's attitude of being unable to solve his own problems.

"If Misaki-senpai were to be snatched away by someone else, and became someone else's girlfriend, and smiled for someone other than you, would you be able to live with yourself!?"

"..."

"Don't you get it, Jin-senpai?"

"Get what?"

"I'm asking you, would it matter to you if your most beloved Misaki were to become another man's thing! Don't you get it?"

"--!"

Jin suddenly shot out his arm, grabbing onto Sorata's wrist.

"You'd better watch your bloody words!"

Before he knew it, Sorata's hand had already been thrown off by Jin. Just as that happened, Jin's other arm sank directly into Sorata's left cheek.

Sorata's body impulsively reacted to the burning pain on his cheek.

His emotions completely blew up, and his anger erupted out of him like lava from a volcano.

‘’’"THEN DON'T LET ME SAY THOSE WORDS!"’’’

Sorata let out a bellowing roar and punched Jin as hard as he could. His right first hit Jin's face, and his left hook hit his shoulder. His firsts hurt.

Jin's glasses fell off and rolled onto the floor.

"Ouch..."

The corner of his mouth had blood running down it.

"Tch. All that bullshit about me being an all-rounder, mature and reliable, where the hell did you get that!"

"Don't add your own fantasies to whatever image of me you may have!"

Not even bothering to conceal his anger and contempt any more, Jin glared murderously at Sorata.

His fists came towards Sorata who was already in a fighting stance. He used his height to his advantage and pummelled Sorata from above, forcing him backwards.

"I can't even handle my own matters! I know I'm going to Osaka, but I don't know whether I'll even bloody pass! All this crap about Misaki is making me lose my focus! And did you know? It's not a bloody easy thing for me to just go up and confess to Misaki! Both of us need to be prepared to stay with each other for the rest of our lives! It's not as simple as any other goody-goody boyfriend-girlfriend relationship!"

"You've already made that revelation long ago, so what the hell are you waiting for!?"

Sorata's anger towards Jin and his shame at his own hot-headedness drove him forward. He roared and bellowed, with Jin in his sights.

But, that was all soon to end. For some reason, Sorata saw Jin's back instead when he tried to punch him. In the next instant, Jin's leg flew at him from the corner of his vision, and it smacked across Sorata's face, accompanied by the telltale whooshing noises of the wind. It was a roundhouse kick.

"Ah."

From the peripherals of his vision, Sorata saw that Mashiro was about to say something. He didn't even have time to feel pain, and everything around him seemed to be swimming and wobbling about. He felt as if he was going to faint, and he instinctively limped three steps backward before collapsing onto the ground.

"Sorata!"

Mashiro called out his name. Sorata wanted to reply, but he couldn't seem to say anything. The sky was twisting and turning above him.

Although he hadn't really over-exerted himself psychically, his breath was completely out of control. Even the sound of his breathing seemed to be coming from very far away.

After that, he felt the hard, cold touch of the cemented floor on his back, which he could somehow feel through his jacket. Perhaps because he had sweated a lot earlier, he felt that its temperature was especially soothing.

Mashiro ran towards Sorata.

"Are you still alive?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave me here alone, thank you very much."

He had embarrassed himself so much in front of Mashiro. Despite this, she still continued to stare at his face, her brow slightly furrowed. She was probably worried.

"Hey, Shiina."

"What is it?"

"If you keep standing there like that, I'll be able to see your panties."

"Don't look."

Mashiro said softly as her hands promptly darted down to grab the frills of her skirt. Because of this, she dropped the manga she was holding, and it fell directly onto Sorata's head. The corner of the book struck his forehead.

"Ah!"

The book didn't seem particularly heavy, but it hurt a lot. Sorata was rolling about on the floor from the pain.

"To think that you would get the balls to look at someone's panties in public, you've grown, Sorata."

Jin picked up his glasses that had fallen off earlier and wore them once again.

"If you really want to argue about it, wasn't it because you kicked me to the ground in the first place!"

He tasted blood in his mouth when he spoke, presumably because he had injured it somehow.

"That's because someone like you who's never been in a fight came and asked for it." "What makes you so good at this then?"

A normal person wouldn't use a roundhouse kick in a fight.

"I'm too handsome, so occasionally I'll get trouble from people that don't have anything better to do."

"The only reason why you keep getting into trouble is because you always say things like that."

As though his body had just realised that he had been hit, Sorata's cheek suddenly felt like it was burning up. It might have been swollen as well.

"Not to mention that I've beaten up a lot of people that looked at Misaki in a lewd manner as well."

"...Since you like her so much, I suppose it's alright."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even if you won't allow yourself to, I'll give you permission for it. Please go out with Misaki-senpai."

Jin smiled weakly, and he sat down about two meters away from Sorata, legs stretched out in front of him. He used both his arms to support himself in this position, and he looked up towards the sky.

"Coming to Suiko was the right choice after all."

He blurted out all of a sudden.

"Oh right, why did you and Misaki-senpai choose to come here anyway?"

They had never touched on this subject before.

"Misaki has always been like this."

Jin's tone was gentle.

"Let's say, well, your status within the hierarchy of a group, or how to properly distance yourself from other people, standard rules of social interaction, things like that...a normal person would have learnt those things at a fairly young age, right? Basically how to get along with other people."

"Yeah."

Sorata said while looking up at the sky, and he heard Jin's disembodied voice drifting from behind him. It felt strange, but he didn't hate the sensation.

"However, Misaki was always different. She's been fearless ever since she learnt to walk and talk, and it's been like that since kindergarten, primary school...all the way until now."

"..."

"A normal person would feel exhausted if they were always this energetic. She always barges into the personal spaces of others

rudely and without permission. Other people began to find her annoying in junior high, but she didn't seem to notice, and by the time she'd reached her third year, she was either ignored, poorly treated or downright discriminated by her classmates."

"..."

Sorata was left speechless. That was because it was not only the first time he was hearing about Misaki's personality when she was in junior high, but also because he had never expected the situation to be that bad. Although he had never seen it personally, of course, he could vaguely visualise what it must have been like for her.

Although the circumstances may differ from case to case, incidents like that happened everywhere. People tend to single out a black sheep within their circle of friends and antagonise them, all for the sake of being assured that they're truly recognized as a part of a group uniting against a common threat. In fact, it might be true that everyone in the world has been through such a stage in their life. Sorata may have unknowingly participated in something similar himself as well.

It was just that in Jin's case, the black sheep happened to be Misaki. This truth began to slowly suffocate Sorata.

"In the end, throughout the three years of her life in junior high, Misaki didn't have a single person she could consider as a friend. "What does this have to do with coming to Suiko?"

"She may not be on Mashiro's level, but since young she's always been the type to find something to do and keep going at it. The difference is, it has nothing to do with influence from her family or

her surroundings, instead her parents just let her do whatever she wanted to do...I think they're great parents."

However, this may not have achieved the desired response within a school environment. Being different from others would cause a person to stand out for the wrong reasons, be unable to fit in, and most of all they become easy targets.

"If you were to see the walls of her room over at her house, I'm sure you'd be freaked out. They're covered with doodles and drawings she drew when she was young. Well, my room's no better." "..."

"It snows frequently in our hometown. A normal ten year old kid would probably think of making a snowman or a snow fort, right? Instead, that idiot went and built a snow sculpture of a bear right at her front door. It was so realistic that people passing by at night were scared shitless, and the police ended up getting involved."

"I can't say I wasn't expecting something like that."

"She even made weird crop circles in the rice fields during winter."

"She really is an alien, huh."

"She painted a gigantic mural on our school field as well, and it actually got on the newspaper."

"She did that over at Suiko too."

...That was when Sorata was in his first year there, although it didn't end up on the newspaper, luckily.

"Other things she did included drawing on the walls of the indoor sports hall and attempting to draw on the ceiling of an empty classroom."

"So she really does whatever she wants to..."

"Yep, she was a complete troublemaker. That's why she was always alone. But, the counselor there was always watching out for this lonely alien. He was a really old, white-haired guy, and everyone called him the "Deity". Even after all the other teachers gave up on her, he still continued to watch over her." "..."

"It was him that recommended Suiko to her. 'It's sad, Kamiigusa. It seems that there aren't any of your alien comrades over here in this small town. However, if you go to this school, you might bump into some of your companions who've crash-landed onto earth as well. So, wanna give Suimei High a go?' That was what he said."

"What a great teacher."

"I think so too, since he managed to say all that with a straight face. When I heard that, I thought for the first time in my life that adults were actually mature, and I wanted to become an adult like him."

"I guess you really can't forget words like that."

"Yeah. But, that's not the only thing that's etched into my memory. Misaki...she listened to what the deity had to say without even a word in response, and she was sitting upright, with her legs tightly closed and her lips pursed, as if she was trying to hold something in. That was when I truly realised what was going on. Misaki understood everything very well. She knew she was different from other people, she even understood that she was completely and utterly alone..."

So, Misaki had applied to Suiko just for the sake of finding new friends? It was kind of a surprise, but at the same time Sorata felt that it was something she would've done.

"What about you then, Jin-senpai?"

"Me...I guess I was just worried about Misaki. When I decided to apply for this place, I spewed a load of crap about how I wanted to be independent from my parents, how I was interested in the arts, a lot of excuses, I was pretty convincingly emotional about it too...which isn't all that surprisingly actually. I may not have realized it, but I was actually choosing Misaki, not the school."

"..."

"Oh well, all in all, I'm glad I came here."

It was obvious why he felt this way. Misaki had made many friends - Hauhau, who was studying music, although the person in question may deny that...the previous student council president too? Not to mention everyone staying in Sakurasou. Mashiro's arrival made up a large part of it too, as although the two were different in many ways, they were similar in that they were both massively talented. They were alien comrades that had drifted all the way to Earth.

"I'm glad I met you, Sorata."

"Huh? Me?"

"You haven't realized it yourself. Since Misaki came here, the person she's been around the most is undoubtedly you."

"I...I didn't do anything much."

"I can't begin to describe how happy I feel, having met someone like you who would actually get mad for her sake."

Jin smiled gently up at the sky, and he thought of Misaki...

"Since you really haven't seem to have noticed, I guess I'll just tell you."

"Me?"

"Considering you can get along this well with people like Misaki, Mashiro and Ryuunosuke, you're really special in your own right."

"Special in my own right...I'm just a normal person being myself, living my own life."

"You're not normal at all. When you meet people with bizarre personalities, people who are equal parts annoying and exhausting to deal with, people that just piss you off and are just plain troublesome...the fact that you can ignore all these things and get along naturally and peacefully with these people is exactly what makes you special. Of this, I can assure you."

Normally if Jin were to say this to him, he would feel like he was being made fun of. However, he could sense that he was being serious this time. Although he couldn't just accept everything he said just like that, a part of him wanted to become just like what Jin had described so as not to prove him wrong.

"Jin-senpai."

"Why so serious?"

"Aoyama went to get Misaki, so if she come I want you to have a nice long talk with her."

"...But will she come?"

Jin said something strange.

"Of course. She's always been wanting to talk to you, but you've been avoiding her all this time."

"Me avoiding her? Sorata, I'm afraid you're quite mistaken."

"About what?"

"For this past half a month or so, she's been avoiding me."

"Huh?"

"It's true that I'm the one who decided to leave Sakurasou in order to keep our distance, but after that I called her many times, and even messaged her. When I try to talk to her in school, she always runs away."

Jin mumbled something that sounded like "Even though I had something to give her".

Sorata couldn't immediately understand what was going on, but how had Misaki put it earlier?

- I don't even know how to open my mouth to talk to him any more...

Also...

- I don't care what Jin may say, I'm scared just the same...

She had said while sobbing.

Even in school, when she clearly had chances to talk to Jin, all she would do was hide.

Everything seemed to be coinciding with what Jin had suggested.

"Despite this, Misaki-senpai will definitely come."

"Why do you think so?"

"Aoyama will definitely bring her here. So..."

"I get it. I'll talk to her."

"Jin-senpai."

"It's just that I don't think it'll end the way you hope it will."

Jin said as he stood up, placing his hand in his coat pocket. Suddenly, Sorata remembered what Chihiro had said.

"What do you have in your pocket?"

"You heard about it from Chihiro, didn't you?"

Jin replied without answering. The hand in his pocket appeared to be grabbing onto something.

Just as Sorata was going to question him further, the door to the roof opened with a loud clang.

The first to appear behind it was Nanami, and Misaki followed suit, hiding behind her with her head bowed.

"Kanda-san, what did you do?"

Nanami jogged over, looking confused as she did so.

"What did I do?"

"The teachers are coming over."

Sorata hurriedly bent over and looked down the stairwell. He heard footsteps approaching, and in the next instant his eyes met with four male teachers.

"So the people fighting on the roof earlier are from Sakurasou!"

The face of the tracksuit-wearing teacher leading the charge was red with anger.

"How dare you people cause trouble right when the entrance examination results are being released!"

"You're right, but we have our own reasons!"

"Who cares about you!"

Ignoring the unreasonable teachers, Sorata slammed the door shut and proceeded to press the full weight of his body against it. There was no way to lock it from outside.

"Misaki-senpai! Jin-senpai!"

If they were separated now, they might not get the chance to properly talk to each other again. Sorata hoped that they could sort things out between them.

Loud banging noises could be heard coming from the other side of the door.

"Oi, Kanda! Open the damn door!"

That was the PE teacher's voice. He was also the consultant for the baseball club, being a complete health nut. Just as the door was about to be forced open, Sorata shifted his center of gravity and managed to shove it firmly closed again. Nanami immediately came over to help, but it didn't seem as if the two of them could last much longer.

"Shiina, come help!"

"Understood."

Mashiro began walking towards them.

"Run, dammit!"

Mashiro jogged over and began pushing his back.

"Are you pushing me or scratching my back? Or are you massaging me?"

He had kind of expected it, but he didn't think Mashiro's physical ability would be this low.

"Which would you like?"

"Push harder!"

He had no time to be thinking about Mashiro.

"Jin-senpai, hurry up!"

Sorata's voice drifted over along with the pounding noises coming from the door and the roaring coming from the teachers. Misaki looked down, unable to properly face Jin.

"What a meddling kouhai. This entire scenario seems so old fashioned, what's up with that?"

The corners of Jin's mouth curled up slightly.

"Although I suppose it's not all that bad to have days like this once in a while."

Jin faced Misaki once more and began slowly walking towards her. However, when he was about three meters away, he stopped. He was probably trying to be considerate of her feelings, considering she was hiding from him all this while.

Jin and Misaki were facing each other at the centre of the rooftop.

It was like a scene from a movie.

"Misaki."

"...Jin."

Misaki merely looked up slightly.

"I got into university."

"...Oh, congratulations."

"I'll be heading to Osaka starting April."

"Yeah..."

"So, Misaki."

"What is it?"

"Don't worry about me, just continue to do whatever you want to do."

"--!"

Misaki finally raised her head in shock, and she looked into Jin's eyes. What was it that Misaki wanted to do? Wouldn't it be anime? Sorata couldn't understand the meaning behind Jin's words.

"During the cultural festival, it was fun making Nyanboron, wasn't it?" "Yeah..."

"Mashiro's drawings inspired you, didn't they?"

"Mm. Every single day was exciting, and I was thinking about all the amazing things I would make as well."

Misaki smiled.

"Not just Mashiron, even Dragon followed all my orders. To be precise, the both of them did even better than I asked of them, I...that was the happiest moment of my life, every single day was so fun!"

"You want to do more fun and exciting things like that, don't you?"

"Mm, I'll try..."

"So, now you know right? I can't handle scriptwriting at all."

"..."

Misaki looked down sadly.

"You're an honest one."

Jin laughed loudly. He himself should know that better than anyone else.

"I'm sorry, but your scripts just can't make it...they can't make my heart race like Mashiron or Dragon's ones."

"Every single time I finish a script, you always feel sort of disappointed, don't you." "I'm sorry."

"The one who should be apologising is me, I've been holding you back all this while." "That's not true!"

"Four years."

"Jin..."

"In four years, I'll become a scriptwriter worthy of being directed by Kamiigusa Misaki and return."

"..."

"So, until then..."

Jin closed the distance between them, after which he pulled his hand out of his pocket and wrapped both his hands around Misaki's left hand. Misaki's eyes widened in shock. The reason for this was revealed as he removed his hand. Sorata saw from where he was standing something that glittered and shined in the sunlight. On the ring finger of Misaki's left hand was a silver-coloured ring.

"This, what, Jin..."

"It's a charm to repel other men. If you don't want it, feel free to throw it away."

"Ah..."

Misaki couldn't seem to be able to convert her emotions into words.

"...I won't ever take it off."

Despite this, she managed to squeeze out a single sentence. She clasped onto the ring as if in prayer.

"Jin."

"What?"

"Four years is an awfully long time."

"I know."

"I won't be able to wait."

"I know how stubborn you are."

"I still want us to be together right now."

"That's why, let's talk this through while we still can. There's still two weeks until graduation."

"Mm...I get it, Jin."

Misaki finally smiled. Sorata felt incredibly relieved, and the strength left his body, causing him, Nanami and Mashiro to be knocked away by the door being forced open by the teachers.

Soon after, the four teachers rushed onto the rooftop like an avalanche.

"All of you! Head over to the staff office for a while!"

"Is a while any longer than five minutes?"

Jin quipped provocatively.

"We're going to teach you all a good lesson today, so you'd better be prepared."

"That's what he said, Sorata."

"Don't push all the responsibility to me!"

"It's not that, I was just trying to be considerate, considering the situation."

"Any urge I had to be considerate is now completely gone, thanks to you!"

"Right, let's go! To the staff office! Kouhai-kun!"

No matter how you looked at it, Misaki's mood didn't seem like that of a person facing imminent punishment. But, this was the Misaki Sorata knew, she was the proud alien of Sakurasou. With a cheerful smile, it brings energy and good spirits to all, not to mention heaps and heaps of trouble.

"Kamiigusa, you don't need to come along."

The teacher's face was solemn, for fear of being brainwashed by the alien.

"And here I was thinking that it's time for me to repay all the kindness you teachers have shown me this past three years~"

"I appreciate your kind intentions. Anyway, Kamiigusa, just head back for now. We just need Mitaka and Kanda to come. Judging by your injuries, you two must've been the ones fighting."

Jin pushed Misaki forward and looked mischievously at Sorata. It seemed like he had a rather bad idea.

"Shiina, let's go. Aoyama too."

Sorata coerced the two of them to head back. The teachers stood speechless, astounded at their willingness to conform. They soon followed, albeit being about ten steps behind them.

That distance was enough. Jin first let Misaki head downstairs, leaving him the last one to head down besides the teachers, after which he turned around and smiled cheerily at them.

"Thanks for taking care of us this past three years."

As he said these commendable words, he immediately closed the door and locked it.

"Oi, Mitaka, open up!"

The teachers began pounding the door.

"Well, I suppose that's OK for now."

"I-Is this really alright? We'll only get into bigger trouble for this."

Nanami squeaked both in shock and out of curiosity.

"Never mind. The one being scolded is gonna be Sorata anyway."

"You too, dammit!"

"I can choose whether I want to go to school or not now, so I'll just stop going starting tomorrow. I'll leave this to you, Sorata."

"You actually thought this through!?"

Jin ignored Sorata and headed down the stairs instead. The teachers continued to pound on the door, but to no avail.

“Come on, let’s head home.”

From the lower section of the stairwell, Jin looked up at Sorata, Nanami, Mashiro and Misaki.

“Home meaning...”

“Sakurasou, of course.”

Jin smiled as he said this. He stepped forward once again, with Misaki rushing forward to keep up. Sorata, Nanami and Mashiro exchanged a glance and followed suit.

As the five of them left school, they began their leisurely stroll back home.

In front of Sorata and Jin, the three girls were happily chit-chatting with each other, with Misaki right smack in the middle of both of them. They appeared to be talking about the ring Misaki had just received.

Misaki had bragged about it to Sorata as well. The ring was designed based on the likeness of one of Misaki’s favorite animals, a grizzly bear, which suited her naturally cute looks well, and of course she was overjoyed about it.

“Jin-senpai, so the reason why you didn’t return to Sakurasou all this while was because of Misaki-senpai.”

“Nah, it was because I was having too much fun picking on the previous student council president.”

It was an excuse he expected Jin to make. Although his statement may have had some truth in it, Jin knew very well that if he were to return to Sakurasou, Misaki would feel trapped, with no personal space to herself. If Jin were to have returned right after winter holidays instead, Misaki might have left Sakurasou instead.

“I misunderstood so many things...um, I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine. I deserved to be scolded for some of those things anyway.”

“But, were you actually planning to talk to Misaki-senpai in the first place?”

He had, after all, even prepared a ring. Jin may have had his own plans, which would mean Sorata merely forced him to act ahead of time.

“Who knows.”

Jin smiled warmly, unwilling to reveal the truth. Sorata didn’t plan on pressing him for it either. In front of him, Misaki was smiling incredibly cheerfully, with Jin looking at her just as gently. Since they’d reached a happy ending, there was no need to bother about the details any longer.

From now until they graduated, what the two would discuss about, and whatever conclusion they may reach was unclear to them. There was still a possibility that the two might get into an argument

and worsen their relationship. But, considering all they had went through, Sorata figured it was best to just focus on what they had for now.

Just as they were about to head down the sloping road leading to Sakurasou, a sense of nostalgia and regret surfaced in Sorata's heart. Jin and Misaki probably wouldn't even get to walk down this road for ten more times. Why did he always have to realize this sort of things only at the very last moments?

He felt there were so many things he could still talk to them about, that there were so many things he could still do with the two of them.

In an attempt to increase his spirits, Sorata raised his head and looked up to the sky. Since they hadn't much time left together, it would be best if they could just cherish this period as well as they could, as he just wanted to continue being with Jin and Misaki, to continue looking at the same things as they did, to continue experiencing the same things as they did. It wasn't the time to be looking back, considering they still had quite a journey before them.

"I haven't been back in two whole months, I guess I kinda miss this place."

Jin said somewhat sentimentally just as they arrived. The last time he was there was probably Christmas night, so it wasn't hard to understand his feelings.

Misaki cried out "I'm home" energetically, and dashed into Sakurasou. Sorata watched her as he did so, feeling relieved that she was finally back to normal, and followed suit behind Mashiro and Nanami.

However, he stopped in his tracks after barely stepping one foot inside the place. Misaki, Mashiro and Nanami had all stopped in front of him suddenly.

“What is it?”

Jin, who was at the very back of them all, asked.

Chihiro was standing at the door as if she was waiting for someone, to which Sorata looked at her, silently requesting an explanation. The meeting that she didn’t want to go to had apparently ended earlier than they expected.

They even saw Ryuunosuke exiting his room at the end of the hallway.

“Good, everyone’s here.”

Chihiro said, her face looking unpleasant as she did so.

“There’s something I need to tell you. We’re calling an emergency meeting.”

“What is it now? You actually look serious for once.”

Sorata asked flippantly in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

However, Chihiro’s response instantly destroyed whatever hopes he had of doing so, and rendered the already poorly-looking situation beyond salvation.

‘’’February 20th’’’

The meeting record for this day was considerably short.

‘’’- Today's discussion was related to the Suimei High School of the Arts’ Executive Board of Staff's decision to demolish Sakurasou by this year. Secretary: Sengoku Chihiro’’’

There were only sixteen days left until graduation…

Author's Notes

I'm Kamoshida Hajime, the man who's been belittled a lot recently when discussing my manuscripts with my chief editor, Araki-san.

Despite being the butt of so many jokes, I'm glad to announce that here we are at the fifth volume of the series.

While it is true that<Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo>may not have existed today without Araki-san and our illustrator, Mizoguchi Keji-sensei, the exact relationship the three of us, namely the writer, the chief editor and the illustrator, have between us may not yet be clear to all of you readers out there.

So, I decided to make that the subject of this afterword.

Occasionally, after we figure out a date and time to discuss the series, we'll go out and have a meal together. But when all's said and done, we often find ourselves coming back so late that we barely manage to catch the final train heading home. Why is that so?

If you really want to know what we usually talk about...we don't go on about topics like "My neighbour next door really loves eating persimmons" or "My breakfast this morning had tomatoes in it too" or other more normal things, in fact, we usually talk about things that can't really be written down here. (TL note: The author also used a Japanese tongue-twister as one of the examples for what they talked about during meetings, but I omitted it since it wouldn't make sense in English.)

We also said stuff like "I really want to those things~~" but at the same time maybe we didn't...sometimes we actually talked about

this series here and there, but sometimes we didn't...anyway, it's hard to explain everything that happened between us here.

Also, the three of us tend to wordlessly stare at the waiters as they dump food into our steamboat or hotpot, so I guess they must feel really awkward. Please don't follow our example.

Anyway, we're finally getting to graduation day next volume...but before that, we have a volume of short stories coming up. With regards to the overall storyline of that volume, since it'll contain a lot of details referencing both volumes 4 and 5, I personally think that it's best to read it after those two volumes. Ah, also, the parts that will be serialized simultaneously in<Dengeki Bunko>should be read in order of publication, of course...

It'll be set in autumn.

I would like to thank the two people whose names were mentioned earlier for looking after me throughout the production of this volume as well. Last but not least, I would also like to put a word out to T-san who helped out with the design of this light novel.

As to all of you who've been reading this far, I dedicate my sincerest gratitude.

Kamoshida Hajime